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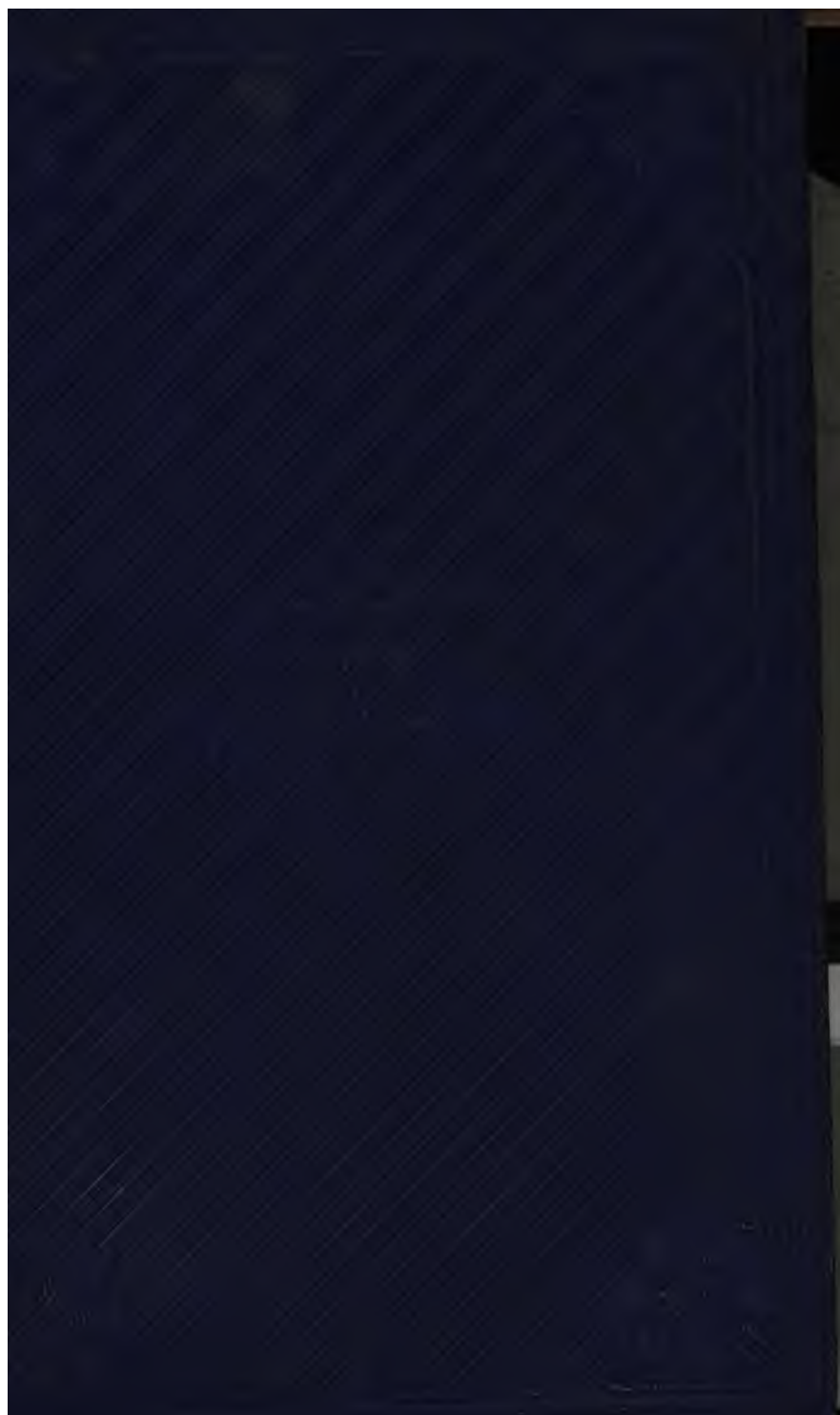
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## **ST. MARTIN'S EVE.**

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# ST. MARTIN'S EVE.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD,

AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE," "MILDRED ARKELL," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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## CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—THE LITTLE HEIR . . . . .	1
II.—FAITHFUL TO THE DEAD . . . . .	23
III.—THE UNEXPLAINED REASON . . . . .	39
IV.—A NEW MISTRESS AT ALNWICK . . . . .	60
V.—ON ST. MARTIN'S EVE . . . . .	78
VI.—THE ALNWICK SUPERSTITION . . . . .	99
VII.—A SHADOW OF THE FUTURE . . . . .	119
VIII.—GRADUALLY WASTING . . . . .	140
IX.—CHANGES AT ALNWICK . . . . .	158
X.—MISS ROSE DARLING . . . . .	177
XI.—MISS ROSE'S ELOPEMENT . . . . .	197
XII.—GEORGINA BEAUCLERC'S LOVE . . . . .	224

CHAP.	PAGE
XIII.—MR. FREDERICK ST. JOHN COME TO GRIEF .	248
XIV.—THE FAIR AT ALNWICK . . . . .	267
XV.—ONLY AS BROTHER AND SISTER . . . .	287
XVI.—ST. MARTIN'S EVE ROUND AGAIN . . .	309
XVII.—CONFLICTING STATEMENTS . . . .	330

# ST. MARTIN'S EVE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE LITTLE HEIR.

*y* THE dull sombre light of a November afternoon was giving place rapidly to twilight. The day had been wet and cold ; and the soddened leaves that strewed the park of one of England's fair domains did not contribute to the cheerfulness of the scene. The mansion pertaining to it stood on a gentle eminence, well open to view, and looking down boldly on its lands : a long but not high house of red brick and many windows ; a cheerful house, rising behind a large and gently sloping lawn, which on this non-genial day gave out as miserable an appearance as did all else of outward nature.

But if the weather was rendering the demesne desolate, it seemed not to affect the house itself. Lights were gleaming from several of its numerous

windows, were passing from room to room, from passage to passage; and fires added their red glow to the brightness. A spectator might have said that some unusual excitement or gaiety prevailed there. Excitement in that house there indeed was, but of gaiety none; for grim Death was about to pay a visit to it: not to call any waiting for him in weary old age, but to snatch the young and lovely.

Had you entered the hall, so bright with light, what would have struck you most was the hushed, unusual silence. Nearly all the servants of the establishment were gathered there; but so still were they, so motionless in their repose, that it had something unnatural. They stood in small groups, for the most part only half showing themselves, and gazing towards a closed dining-room, sorrow and consternation imprinted on their faces. Two physicians, nearly as hushed in manner just now as the servants themselves, were partaking of refreshments inside it; the butler himself was waiting on them; and as he came out and crossed the hall with noiseless tread, he repeated an ominous opinion he had heard hinted at. One of the women servants, her tears streaming down, started up the broad, carpeted staircase with im-

pulsive but soft footfalls, and a younger girl, looking frightened to death, followed her. They stole along the corridor to the right, and halted at a door there. Why, or for what purpose, they could not have told, since they might not presume to enter into the chamber; for their lady was lying there at the point of doom.

A handsome, spacious bed-chamber, opening into a dressing-room, but the door was nearly closed between them now. Over the dressing-room fire was a tall, upright, middle-aged woman, more intelligent and respectable-looking than are some of her class. She wore a clean print gown, and a close white cap shaded a cheerful countenance. The fire-glow shone full on her brown eyes, on the tears that glistened in them. Strange sight! for the continuous scenes of sickness, sometimes of death, in which these hired nurses' lives are passed, tend to render them callous to outward emotion.

Pacing the carpet slowly and sadly, his eyes cast down in thought, was a little man of ruddy complexion, sharp, thin features, and hair going grey with years. It was the family medical attendant, Mr. Pym. His hands were clasped behind him, resting on his back as he walked,

and his gaze, worn and anxious, was never lifted from the ground.

"This will make the second case we have lost this year," suddenly observed the woman, whose name was Dade, in a whispered tone. "What can have made it so unlucky a year?"

The surgeon gave no answer. Perhaps he did not like the "we" in her remark. But he knew that his duty was always performed to the very utmost of his skill and power, that it had been in the two cases to which she alluded; and his conscience, so far, was at peace before God.

"There are no further means that can be tried?" resumed the nurse, using the words as an assertion, more than as a question, and she glanced towards the partially-opened door connecting the two apartments.

"None," was the conclusive reply. "She is sinking rapidly."

A long pause. The nurse stood motionless, the surgeon pursued his slow and noiseless tread. Suddenly he stopped and turned his head, speaking in a quick tone.

"Where's the baby, Mrs. Dade?"

"He's in the cradle, sir, by her side. She looked as if she wanted him left there."

And then the doctor remembered, and paced on as before. He had spoken in momentary forgetfulness.

The silence within the sick chamber was as great and more painful: the moments of bustle and anxiety had passed. The fire in the handsome grate had burnt down to embers; a pale light was emitted from the shaded lamp; and the air was redolent, almost to faintness, with perfume. Essences had been sprinkled about in profusion, as if they would make pleasant the way to death! The heavy blue velvet curtains were drawn back from the bed; and, lying there, was a form young and fair, with a pale, exhausted face. Everything in the chamber spoke of wealth, of comfort, of luxury: but not all the wealth and luxury of the whole world combined, had they been brought together, could have availed to arrest the fastly-fleeting spirit already on its wing. On the far side of the bed stood a pretty cradle, ornamented with blue silk and lace: the little child so quietly and unconsciously sleeping in it, had seen the light but yesterday.

Leaning over the bed was a young man bowed down with grief, of attractive features and gentlemanly bearing. Not long had they been man



and wife, but a year at most, and now it was hard to part ; doubly hard with this new tie which had been born to them. Yet they both knew it must be so, and he had thrown his arm lightly across her, and laid his cheek, wet with tears, against hers, vainly wishing, perhaps half hoping, that his heart's bitter prayers might avail to renew her life. The silence between them had been long and agonising : each heart was aching with painful thoughts ; yet it seemed in that last hour as if they could not give them utterance. May heaven shed its balm on all such partings !

He raised his face and pushed his hair from his brow as he looked at her, for she had moved restlessly, as if in sudden pain. It was not pain of body : of that she was free in this, the passing : but pain of mind. An anxious care, one of the many she must leave on earth, was pressing upon that lady's brain.

"When the months and the years go by," she murmured, breaking the silence, and clasping her hands in feeble supplication to him, "and you think of another wife, oh choose one that will be a *mother* to my child. Be not allured by beauty, be not tempted by wealth, be not ensnared by specious deceit ; but take one who will be to him

the loving mother that I would have been. Some one whom you know well and can trust ; not a stranger, not a——”

“I shall never marry again,” he interrupted in an impassioned tone, when his first surprise allowed him to speak. “You, my first and only love, shall be the sole wife ever taken to my bosom. Never shall another woman usurp your place ; and here I swear——”

“Hush ! hush !” she panted, laying her hand upon his lips to stop the incautious words. “It were cruel of me to exact such a promise from you : and it would be useless for you to make it, for you would never keep it, save with self-upbraiding. The remembrance of this scene will pass away ; the remembrance of me will pass ; and then you will ask yourself why should your life be condemned to solitude. No, no. To remain faithful to the dead is not in man’s nature.”

He thought in his own heart, honestly thought it then, that her opinion was a mistaken one, and he marvelled that she should so speak : he felt as sure as he could feel of anything in this world, that he should prove a living refutation of it. Dying though she was, partially oblivious already

to earth and earth's interests, she yet saw clearer into human nature than he.

"Yet oh, forget me not wholly!" she whispered. "Let there be brief moments when the remembrance of me shall return to you; when you will dwell upon me as having been the one you once best loved on earth!"

Another deep silence from words, for he could not answer: his sobs were choking him; the pulses of his anguished heart were beating wildly. *She* spoke not from exhaustion; and several minutes passed on.

"What will you have him named?" he asked abruptly, pointing towards the cradle.

"Call him Benjamin," she replied, after a minute's thought, and she spoke now with difficulty. "He cost Rachel her life, as this child has cost mine. And oh, may he be to you the solace that Benjamin was to old Jacob; and may you love and cherish this child as he did his!"

Her voice gradually failed her, a spasm smote her features, and she lay more heavily on the pillow. Her husband raised her: he clasped her fluttering heart to his; he wildly kissed her pallid face. But that face was losing its look of con-

sciousness, and no tenderness could arrest the departing spirit. In a paroxysm of alarm: as if, now that the moment had come, it took him by surprise, a thing that had not been looked for: he cried out to the medical man in the adjoining chamber.

Mr. Pym came in, followed by the nurse. He gave once glance at the bed, and then whispered the woman to summon the physicians. He knew their presence would be utterly useless, but at such times man deems it well to fulfil these outward forms.

They hastened up the stairs. They remained but a few minutes in the room, and then left it; left soon the house. The better part of that lovely lady had quitted it before they did.

And it was only the previous day that the joy-bells had rung out in the adjacent village on account of the birth! only this same very morning that the local newspaper, wet from the press, had given forth the festal news to the world!

"On the 10th inst., at Alnwick Hall, the wife of George Carleton St. John, Esq., of a son and heir."

And the journal went its way, as journals do go their way, into many a neighbouring home,

whose inmates made their comments on the one piece of news that sounded of more interest to them than all the rest, and congratulated each other on the birth of Alnwick's heir, little conscious of the tragedy that was supervening upon it.

Amidst the houses to which the journal penetrated was one on the other side the village of Alnwick; a small, unpretending dwelling this house, standing a little away from the high road, but a pretty place withal, hidden amidst its surrounding shrubs and trees. It was called "The Cottage." Its mistress had named it so with a sort of affectation of humility, for it was superior to a cottage, even to an elegant one.

Lying back in a lounging chair, in one of the pretty sitting-rooms, where she had just thrown herself, not from illness but from fatigue, was the owner of the house, when the newspaper was taken in. A woman of nearly fifty, but looking a great deal younger, with her still bright blue eyes and her auburn hair. She was a widow; a widow for the second time. Barely twenty years of age when her first husband, Mr. Norris, died, she had soon espoused another, Colonel Darling. In ten years she was a widow again, and had

remained such. She chose to retain the name of Norris, without any right to do so, whether of custom or else, and her cards were printed "Mrs. Norris Darling," so that people, especially strangers, hardly knew by which to address her, and sometimes called her Norris and sometimes Darling. The fact is, Mrs. Darling was a little given to be pretentious, as ladies will be when conscious of a lack of dignity in themselves or their surroundings. She had been packing things up all the morning; she, her maid, and two of her daughters, for they were summoned from home unexpectedly; and she was falling into a doze when the footman came in.

"What is it?" she asked in a cross accent; and the man looked up in surprise to hear it from his usually easy-tempered mistress.

"It is only the newspaper, ma'am."

"Put it down, Tomkins," she answered, too idle to take it. "I think I was asleep. I am very tired."

The man laid it on the table and quitted the room, meeting a staid-looking rather old-fashioned young lady who was entering it, for whom he made way. It was Miss Darling, and

she looked thirty years of age if she looked a day. But she was only five-and-twenty.

"Well, Mary Anne, is it all done?"

"It is all done, mamma. Prance is waiting for Tomkins to cord the boxes."

Mrs. Darling closed her eyes again, and her daughter took up the unopened newspaper, when another young lady, very much resembling the first, and looking quite as old, came in. She gave a slight shiver as she passed the window, and began to stir the fire.

"What a miserable day it is! I wish we could put off our journey."

"Where's the use of wishing that, Margaret?" said Miss Darling. "But it *is* miserable. Has Charlotte found the cover of her desk?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose Charlotte has looked for it. I heard her tell Prance that none of her things must be forgotten."

"True. When did Charlotte ever trouble herself to look for anything?" was Mary Anne Darling's response; but she spoke it more as a self-soliloquy than as a reply.

Margaret Darling—she was one year younger than her sister—drew a chair in front of the

fire, and put her feet upon the fender. They had got cold, standing over the packing.

"Is that the newspaper? Is there any news, Mary Anne?"

"Yes, there's news," was the quiet answer: but Miss Darling's manner was always quiet. "A baby is born at the Hall."

"What?" exclaimed Mrs. Darling, starting up as she caught the words, and all her lethargy was gone. "Is the baby born, Mary Anne?"

For answer, Miss Darling read out the words: "On the 10th instant, at Alnwick Hall, the wife of George Carleton St. John, Esq., of a son and heir."

"I am glad it's a boy!" exclaimed Mrs. Darling. "How proud they will be of it! On the 10th—that was yesterday. Then rely upon it those bells Charlotte said she heard ringing, were for it."

"And that Mary Anne said must be Charlotte's fancy," observed Margaret. "I would trust Charlotte's ears to any extent."

"And now, how can I manage it?" exclaimed Mrs. Darling, who had been plunged in momentary thought, and was paying no attention to the



last remark. "I must contrive to see Mrs. St. John before I go away."

"But why, mamma?"

"Why?" repeated Mrs. Darling, turning rather sharply on her daughter Mary Anne, who had asked the question. "Because I should like to; because its neighbourly to go to her, poor young mother; because it may be months before we are back here, and I have the opportunity of seeing her again; and because I'm curious to hear all the interesting particulars. That's why, Mary Anne: and I shall go."

Mrs. Darling allowed no interference with her will—at least from *these* daughters, and Mary Anne was dutifully silent. "I was only thinking, mamma, what an unpleasant day it would be for you to walk over," she presently said. "And I don't see how you will have time."

"Plenty of time; and for the unpleasantness I don't care; you never yet knew me to stop indoors for weather. Pretty Mrs. St. John! Let me read the announcement for myself."

She took the paper in her hand, and was gazing at the words with a pleased smile, when the door again opened, and some one else entered the

room. A tall, elegant girl of apparently but three or four-and-twenty, an imperious, regal, haughty girl, whose raven-black hair was braided over pale, regular features, and whose rich silk attire glistened and rustled as she walked. Who would have believed that she was older by some three or four years than the Miss Darlings?—who would have believed that they were even half-sisters?—she, with her stately beauty, her costly attire, and they with their homely faces, old-fashioned look, and plain green merino gowns. Mrs. Darling had two daughters who absorbed all the money for dress that she could spare; the eldest, Charlotte Norris, and the youngest, whom you will meet by and by; no wonder that these two middle ones, Mary Anne and Margaret, with their meek spirits and quiet tastes, were obliged to dress in plain merinos.

“Charlotte, here’s news in the paper,” Mary Anne was beginning, but Mrs. Darling drowned the words: and Mary Anne saw with some momentary surprise, that her mother had crushed the paper in her hand, as if not caring that it should be seen.

“Charlotte, my darling, *would* you mind telling Prance that I shall want my black silk

cloak taken out of the hair-trunk again? Go to her now, dear, before she gets it corded."

Miss Norris, who had still the door-handle in her hand, quitted the room again. Mrs. Darling turned to her daughters.

"Say nothing to Charlotte of this announcement. I will tell her of it myself."

"But why, mamma?" asked Miss Darling, giving way to her curiosity—a fault that could not often be charged upon her.

"Because it is my pleasure," answered Mrs. Darling, rising.

"I beg your pardon, mamma," said Mary Anne. "Of course you know best."

Mrs. Darling did know best. At any rate, the two daughters before her were taught to think so. Mary Anne and Margaret Darling had been reared to implicit obedience in one respect—never to question the line of conduct pursued by Mrs. Darling to their half-sister, never to comment on it in the slightest degree. Mrs. Darling folded the newspaper as small as she could, crammed it into her pocket, and followed Charlotte up-stairs.

Later in the day she set out to walk to Alnwick Hall. It was getting dark, and she

had not intended to be so late as this, but one thing or another had detained her. Her daughters remonstrated against her setting out to walk alone; but Mrs. Darling, accustomed to the freedom and security of the country, asked what was to hurt her; and started. The Hall was nearly three miles distant from her own home, through the village of Alnwick; but the road was by no means lonely in any part of it. She walked with a quick step, not stopping to speak to anybody she met, and had left the village behind her some time, and was nearing the Hall, when the death-bell of Alnwick church rang out suddenly, but not very distinctly, on the heavy air. It was quite dark then.

“Poor old Mother Tippeton must be gone!” Mrs. Darling exclaimed to herself, standing for a moment to listen. “Pym told me she could not last long. Well, it was time: I suppose she was eighty.”

Not another thought, save of old Mother Tippeton, entered her mind; not the faintest suspicion that the bell was tolling for one younger and fairer. She went on, over the broad winding way through the beautiful park, and gained the door of Alnwick Hall.

It might have struck her—but it did not—that besides the man who opened the door to her, other servants came peeping into the hall, as if in curiosity as to the visitor. She stepped over the threshold out of the gloomy night.

“How is your mistress, Haines? Getting on all right?” she asked, rubbing her shoes well on the mat.

“Oh, ma’am, she’s dead!”

Mrs. Darling certainly heard the words, but they appeared not to penetrate to her senses. She stilled her feet and stared at the speaker.

“She is just dead, ma’am; not an hour ago. Two physicians were had to her, besides Mr. Pym, but nothing could be done.”

Down sat Mrs. Darling on the hall bench. Perhaps only once before, in all her whole life, had she been so seized with consternation.

“*Dead!* Good Heavens! I came to sit half-an-hour with her before leaving Alnwick, for I may not be back for months. What an awful thing! Poor Caroline Carleton!”

Drawing her cloak around her, Mrs. Darling crossed the hall towards the housekeeper’s room, unconsciously calling the deceased by her maiden name, the one she had longest known her by.

"I should like to see the nurse," she said, "if she can spare a moment to come to me."

The housekeeper, a stout woman, very respectable, who had come to the Hall a year ago with its now dead mistress, was at the table writing a note, as well as she could for her tears, when Mrs. Darling entered. Laying down her pen, she told all she knew of the calamity, in reply to the low and eager questions. But Mrs. Darling grew impatient.

"A fine, beautiful baby, you say—never mind the baby, Mrs. Tritton. What can have caused the death?"

The stout old lady shook her head. "She died from exhaustion, they say, ma'am. But she had a fall a few days ago, and I believe that had something to do with it. I can't bear to *think* of it just yet. Alive and well and merry but a day or two ago; and now dead! It seems like a dream."

Her sobs deepened. The ready tears filled Mrs. Darling's eyes. She wiped them away, and inquired what would be done about the bringing up of the child. Mrs. Darling was a practical woman, and had never allowed feelings to interfere with business.

"That's the first great care," was the reply of the housekeeper. "Mr. Pym does not know of anybody just now that could come in. I suppose it will have to be brought up by hand: and the master, I believe, wishes that it should be."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Darling.

"Mr. Pym has been with him since the death, ma'am, speaking about it, and the master said he did not like stranger nurses. 'And in this case it does not matter,' said Mr. Pym to me, 'the boy's so big and strong that he'd bring himself up almost, if you put him outside the street-door.' And it's true."

"Does Mr. St. John take it much to heart?"

"Ay, that he does," was the emphatic reply. "He is shut up in his own room where he keeps his business papers and things: but, ma'am"—and the tone was suddenly lowered—"a body going by it, and pausing for a moment, may hear the sobs inside. If any young husband ever loved a wife, Mr. Carleton St. John loved his. Poor child! she's gone early to join her parents!"

Mrs. Darling, who had her full share of curiosity—and what woman has not in a case

like this?—stole up-stairs to see the baby; to see the baby's poor young mother; to gossip for a minute or two with the nurse, Mrs. Dade, who could not come to her. And then she stole down again; for the time was getting on.

"Give my very best regards to Mr. St. John when you get the opportunity," she said to Mrs. Tritton. "Tell him how truly shocked and grieved I am. But it is a fine healthy baby: and that, as the days go on, will be a consolation to him."

"I wish you would stay to take something, ma'am," was the reply of the housekeeper.

Mrs. Darling did not want anything. She had dined just before she came out, and had now no time to lose. She explained matters to the housekeeper: that a summons to her sick mother, who was very old, was taking her and her daughters away from home. They were starting that evening by the seven o'clock night train.

"And they are at the station already, I am sure," she said; "and I must run all the way to it. Sad news this is, to cheer me on my journey!"

Sad indeed. And the public thought so 'as



well as Mrs. Darling. That same week the newspapers put forth another announcement.

"On the 11th inst., at Alnwick Hall, in her twenty-third year, Caroline, the beloved wife of George Carleton St. John."

## CHAPTER II.

### FAITHFUL TO THE DEAD.

“To remain faithful to the dead is not in man’s nature.”

Such were the words spoken by Mrs. Carleton St. John in dying; and a greater truth was never recorded by Solomon.

The seasons had gone on; spring had succeeded to winter; summer to spring; autumn was succeeding to summer; nothing like a twelvemonth had passed since the death, and yet rumour, with its many-headed tongues, was whispering that George Carleton St. John had begun to think of a second wife.

The baby had thrived from its birth. Mr. St. John appeared to have an invincible repugnance to any woman’s supplying the place of its mother; and so they fed the child upon the next best food that was proper for it, and it had done

well. The housekeeper strongly recommended to Mr. St. John a niece of her own to take care of it, and the young woman arrived from a distance ; a comely, fair-complexioned, nice-looking young woman, named Honoria Tritton ; and she entered upon her charge. All things went smoothly ; and Mr. St. John's first grief yielded to time and change : as all griefs must so yield under God's mercy.

Friends had come to visit Mr. St. John in the summer. Relatives, they were, indeed, but distant ones. Gay people they proved to be ; and they stayed on, and gradually the Hall had its festal gatherings again, and its master began to go out amidst the county families. Whether it might be to escape the sad sorrow left on him by his great loss, or to make things pleasant for these visitors, certain it was that George St. John no longer eschewed gay meetings, whether in his own house or abroad. Mrs. Tritton's opinion was, that he had given the invitation to his relatives to stay with him, from finding his life now at the Hall so monotonously dull. If so, their advent had had the desired effect, and had raised him out of himself and his care.

It is surprising, when once an effort of this sort

is made, and we awake from a prolonged term of sorrowing grief, how *easily* the grief is laid aside. Unconsciously it seems to slip away from us, and is forgotten. From that eleventh day of November down to June, Mr. St. John had done nothing but indulge his grief. It had grown calmer, of course, by degrees; but he had not in the least striven to lift himself from its bitterness. No very long term, some may say, seven months; but let me tell you that it *is* long when given wholly to tears and solitude. A re-action must succeed to all violent emotions, even to that caused by the death of one dearly beloved; and it came to George St. John, came with the sojourn of his visitors. A fortnight's association with them, and he was not the same man: as host, he had to exert himself, and with the exertion came the pleasure in it. Ere June was ended, he had forgotten three-parts of his sorrow: it seemed, as he might have described it himself, to have slipped away from his heart, leaving healing in its place and semi-forgetfulness. He would have told you that he regretted his wife as much as ever; but he did not; for other interests were re-asserting their place within him. The sorrow had nearly spent itself, and was dying out. Do not blame him: man

cannot act against his nature ; least of all when in the heyday of youth.

He could not offer a churlish roof to his visitors, who had journeyed far to sojourn with him ; they were of the world, and expected to be entertained. Mr. St. John invited people to the Hall to meet them ; and went out with them in return. In July the county families began to seek their homes after the whirl of the London season, bringing their guests with them, and gay parties were the rule of the hour. Archery, boating, dancing on lawns, dinners : never a day but something more agreeable to the rest succeeded to the other. Mr. Carleton was pressed to attend all, and did attend a great many. Can you wonder at this pressing ? Of great prospective wealth, the presumptive heir to a baronetcy, and withal an attractive man—the world knows how to estimate such. But the prize was not as great as it had been, since no other woman that might succeed in gaining him, or whom he might choose himself, irrespective of any seeking on her own part, could reasonably hope to give birth to the heir that should succeed. That heir was already in the world—the little child whose advent had cost a precious life.

It could not be said that Mr. St. John had much right, especially now, to the name of Carleton. His name had been simply George St. John, until he married the rich heiress, Caroline Carleton: and with her property he had to assume her name, for her dead father had so enjoined it in his will. But for that expectant baronetage, he might have added the new name *after* his own; as it was, he did not. The new name was rather a convenience: there were several branches of the St. John family, one of them far higher in the word's social scale than George St. John of Alnwick, or even his uncle the baronet; and people fell into the habit of calling him Mr. Carleton, as a pre-distinction. The little child had also been christened Carleton.

And so George Carleton St. John, yielding to the effacing hand of time, forgot in a degree her who had lain on his bosom, and made the brief sunshine of his existence; he went out in the world again, and had gatherings of his own, and was altogether re-initiated into social life.

On a lovely day in September, Alnwick Hall was glittering with guests. Chiefest of all the fêtes by which that autumn and the neighbourhood had been distinguished, was this last one

held at the Hall. Mr. St. John had spared neither pains nor money to render it an attractive one : and he had certainly succeeded. Brilliant groups were in the park, in the temporary marquee on the lawn, and in the house itself ; a sort of *fête-champêtre*. Was it out of place, all that glittering gaiety, with the closing scene of only ten months before ?—the young life so suddenly sacrificed ? Perhaps so : but the idea did not once occur to George St. John. It was not likely to do so now, when *another* was casting her spells upon his heart. I have told you that rumour's glib tongue had already whispered words of a second mistress at Alnwick.

In a pleasant room, opening on one side to the conservatory, its front windows looking on the park, several ladies were assembled. They were of various ages, of various degrees of beauty. One stood conspicuous amidst the rest. Not for her beauty, though that was great ; not for her dress, though that was all that can be imagined of costly elegance ; but for a certain haughty, imperious air, and a most peculiar expression that would now and again gleam from her eyes. An expression that many had observed and that none could fathom ; a sort of wild expression of abso-

lute *will*. It was not often noticed ; but it might have been just now. You have seen that tall, finely-formed girl before, her thrown-back head, her swan-like neck ; you have seen the pale features, regular as any ever carved from sculpture, the thin lips so firmly closed, the smooth luxuriant raven hair. Quiet to a degree in bearing and manner, in spite of her haughty air there was an indisputable attraction about her. Could the rumour be true—that the greatest match of all the county was about to be laid at Charlotte Norris's feet ? If so, what a triumph for her mother ; what a triumph for herself, so proud and portionless.

Mrs. Norris (she was Mrs. Darling, you know) stood by her side. Very pretty still, but not half as grand a woman as her daughter. Charlotte looked well to-day ; never better ; in her pretty white gossamer bonnet and sweeping white ber-nous, you could not have taken her to be much past twenty. And the ladies around looked on her with envious eyes, and repeated over to themselves, what a triumph for Mrs. Norris Darling !

Perhaps so ; but that lady was as yet unconscious of it. She had no more idea that that particular triumph was in store for her, or that



Charlotte had, even in rumour, been given to Mr. St. John of Alnwick, than had Alnwick's little heir, who was crowing before her eyes now. This was the first time Mrs. Darling had been to the Hall since that melancholy evening visit, the past November. Only the previous day had she returned to her cottage home.

In the centre of the ladies stood a young woman holding the baby. That he was a fine baby none could dispute. He was not indeed what could be called a pretty child, but a rather unusual look of intelligence for one so young pervaded his features and his clear grey eyes, rendering his face excessively pleasing. And had he possessed all the beauty that since the creation of man has been told of or sung, those fair women, displacing one another around him, could not have bestowed upon him more laudatory praise—for he was the heir of Alnwick, and Alnwick's possessor was there to hear it.

George St. John's cheeks were flushed with pleasure, and his eyes shone as he listened to the flattery; for he fondly loved his child. The little boy wore a broad black sash on his white frock, black ribbons tied up his sleeves, and his pretty

round fat arms were stretched out to anybody who would notice him.

"Yes, he is a fine little fellow," observed Mr. St. John, more gratified as the praises grew higher. "He will walk soon."

"Pray is that his nurse?" inquired Mrs. Norris Darling, scanning the maid through her eye-glass. "What is your name, young woman?"

"My name is Honoria, madam," replied the girl, looking pleased and curtsying, "but they call me Honour, for shortness. Honoria Tritton."

"And what is the name of this dear child?" asked Miss Norris, drawing nearer. "I have always heard him called Baby."

"Well, his name gets abbreviated for the same reason that Honour's does," laughed Mr. St. John. "He was christened Benjamin, but is universally known amongst us as Benja."

Mrs. Norris Darling (let us give her the two names once in a way!) continued to examine the nurse by help of the glass. She needed a glass just as much as you or I, reader; and had she not been surrounded by that fashionable crowd, would as soon have thought of looking at Honour through the ring of her parasol. But there are many little ways pertaining to pre-

tentiousness, and that's one of them. Mrs. Norris Darling possessed a notion that an eyeglass added immensely in some way to her dignity. She turned her glass on Honour from top to toe, in the same cool manner that other glasses are turned; and she saw a sensible-looking young woman, with a clear, fair skin, good forehead, and truthful eyes of a light blue.'

"Honoria Tritton?" she repeated. "You must be a relative of Mr. Carleton St. John's housekeeper!"

"I am her niece, madam," replied Honour. "I was sent for to take charge of the baby at his birth, and I have done so ever since."

"The sole charge?"

"Oh yes; the sole charge."

"It is a great responsibility," remarked Mrs. Norris Darling, dropping the glass, and speaking, not to Honour, but to the ladies around.

Mr. St. John had taken his child from the nurse's arms, and was fondly caressing it. His very actions, his movements, betrayed the depth of his affection, and a sharp feeling of jealousy shot through the heart of the beautiful Miss Norris as she watched him. "Will he ever love another child as he loves this?" was the thought

that arose unbidden to her mind. No, never, Miss Norris; you need not ask or wish it: man does not love another as he loves his first-born.

But her beautiful features were smooth as polished crystal as she drew near to Mr. St. John. He glanced at her with a welcoming smile.

"Do let me nurse him!" she said in a low tone. "I adore children; and this one seems made to be loved."

Mr. St. John resigned the boy to her. She carried him away into the conservatory, to a remote bench out of sight, sat down, and amused him with her gold neck-chain. The little fellow sat confidently on her knee; one hand enclosing her fore-finger, the other grasping the glittering coil. Mr. St. John followed her.

"Look at him!" she said, her quiet face changed to rapture as she glanced at Mr. St. John; "look at his nimble little fingers and bright eyes! How happy he is!"

"Happy in all things save one," whispered Mr. St. John, leaning over the child, but gazing at herself. "He has no mother to love and guide him."

Those unfathomable eyes of hers were cast down, so that the eyelids entirely hid them, and

a crimson flush mantled in her usually pale cheeks.

"He wants a mother," proceeded Mr. St. John; "he *must* have a mother. Not now will I urge it, when so many are near; but, Charlotte, you know whom I would entreat to be that mother, and my beloved wife."

A strange whirl of agitation shook her, impeding instant utterance. Mr. St. John saw the signs, and laid his hand upon her with a smile.

"Ought you to talk to me of a *beloved* wife?" she asked, in an impassioned tone, as she glanced momentarily up at him. "She who lies buried in her grave was yours."

"I did not love her as I shall love you," he hastened to avow—and in the moment's fervour it may be that he thought he spoke the truth. "Had I known *you* better then, I might never have chosen her."

"Yet see how you love her child!"

"And I will passionately love any that may be born to you, Charlotte," he whispered. But the very remark, had Mr. St. John been cool enough or wise enough to analyse it, might have told him that her heart, even now, before she was

anything to him, was shaken by jealousy of the child. He was neither cool nor wise just then.

He bent his head lower and lower ; he murmured vows of everlasting tenderness ; he suffered his face to rest against hers, as it had once rested against that of his dying wife. She resisted not. But when a host of intruders came flocking in, she raised her haughty head, and swept on with a scornful step, as she resigned the infant into the arms of its nurse.

George St. John had loved his wife with the fresh, rapturous feelings that he could never know again ; and he loved her memory. Yet here he was, ere ten little months had elapsed, willing to swear to another that she was the first who had awakened true passion in his heart ! But Caroline Carleton had faded away from his sight, and Charlotte Norris stood before him in all her beauty. It is the way of man ; ay, and often of woman. *To remain faithful to the dead is not in man's nature.*

The fête was over, and they were driving home—Mrs. Darling and her daughter. To judge by the manner of the two ladies, one might have thought it was the mother who had re-

ceived so momentous a proposal ; not the daughter. Charlotte sat quiet and calm, leaning back in her corner of the chariot ; Mrs. Darling was flushed, restless, evidently disturbed. Mr. St. John had said to her a word of enlightenment in parting, and it startled her out of her easy equanimity.

"Charlotte," she began—and not until they were drawing near the end of their homeward road, and the village of Alnwick was left behind them, did she speak—"Charlotte, I hope I misunderstood Mr. St. John?"

Charlotte lifted her eyes. "I do not know to what you allude, mamma. As to what do you hope you misunderstood Mr. St. John?"

"He hinted to me—but it was a plain hint—that he should call to-morrow to speak to me about you. Charlotte, it will be of no use: I cannot let you marry Mr. Carleton."

"Please not to call him by that name," was the quiet rejoinder.

"Mr. St. John, then—what does it matter? I should not like you to marry him. Has he really asked you to be his wife?"

"Yes."

"It must have been very sudden!"

"Not so. I think we have understood each other for some little time past."

"Then he has been in the habit of coming to the cottage!"

"Oh yes."

Mrs. Darling, who had raised herself in some commotion as she asked the last question, sank back again, and a blank look of mortification, of inward trouble, settled on her face. The carriage was approaching their door ere she spoke again, her tones betraying an agitation that was ill-suppressed.

"I cannot spare you, Charlotte! Charlotte, my darling, I cannot spare you! How often have I hoped, and urged, and prayed that you would never leave me—that you would be the one to stay and cheer my old age!"

Charlotte shook her head with a smile. Had her mother been less agitated, less evidently in earnest, she might have enlarged on the unreasonableness of such a wish. As it was, she only answered playfully, that her mother need not think of old age these twenty years.

"Are you marrying him for his money—his position?" resumed Mrs. Darling.

"I am tired, mamma; I wish you'd not



question me. Really I can't exactly particularise why I am marrying him."

"*You* a second wife! Have you reflected, Charlotte, that Caroline Carleton was his first choice; that there's already an heir to Alnwick who will inherit all; that George St. John has hardly a shilling beyond his entailed estates——"

"Don't, mamma!" was Charlotte's interruption, and her brow had contracted as if in pain. "It is quite useless your saying this. I should marry George St. John, though I knew that I must beg my bread afterwards from door to door."

A moan, as of one in some sorrow too great for utterance, broke from the lips of Mrs. Darling, and she sank back in the carriage and clasped her hands in pain.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE UNEXPLAINED REASON.

Not a word was spoken by either mother or daughter as they entered their home. The little French clock in the drawing-room pointed to eleven—for the festivities at the Hall had been prolonged into evening—and Charlotte, perhaps afraid of further contention, said good night, and went up at once to her chamber. Mrs. Darling threw off her cloak and bonnet, and began to pace the room. It was rather a habit of hers when disturbed or vexed.

Never had she been so disturbed as this. Her usual crosses had been but light ones, which she scolded or talked away; *this* seemed to be too deep, too real, for any talking.

It might be unreasonable; everybody that knew of it said it was so; but Mrs. Darling had lived in the ardent hope that her eldest daughter

—more fondly cherished by her than all the rest —would never leave her, never marry. She had planned and schemed against it. Some two or three years ago, a suspicion arose in her mind that Charlotte was falling in love with George St. John, and she put a summary stop to it by carrying off Charlotte, and keeping her away until the danger was over. He had married Caroline Carleton before they came back again. No one living had suspected this manœuvre on the mother's part, or that Charlotte had been in danger of loving the master of Alnwick—if she had not loved him—except Margaret Darling. Surely it must have been unreasonable. Mr. St. John was a free man then, in every sense of the word, and Charlotte's son, had she married him and borne one, would have been the heir!

That Mrs. Darling's love for Charlotte had always been inordinate, those about them knew. But, as a woman of the world, she might have foreseen how utterly powerless would be a mother's love to keep her daughter always by her side. Charlotte said once to her in a joking way, that she had better put her into a convent, and make a nun of her: and indeed that would have been about the only preventive. And now, in

spite of her precaution, Charlotte was about to marry; to be a second wife. That very fact alone brought some gall to Mrs. Darling.

She had deemed Charlotte so secure. She had never dreamt of the treason that was afloat. Their visit to her old mother in Berkshire had been prolonged until June, and all that while Charlotte had been safe under her own eye. In June, old Mrs. Darling (it was the same name, for Mrs. Darling's second husband had been a distant cousin) grew so convalescent that there was no scruple in quitting her; and Mrs. Darling had despatched Charlotte to Alnwick, under the convoy and charge of Mary Anne, who was so much older than her years, and might be thoroughly trusted. Margaret remained behind with her grandmother, and Mrs. Darling went on the Continent to see her youngest daughter, Rose, who was at school there. She only intended to be absent a fortnight, by the end of that time she meant to be at Alnwick; but ere it was concluded, she was summoned back in haste to her old mother, who had had a relapse. So that it was September before Mrs. Darling really got to Alnwick; she arrived just in time to attend the fête at Mr. St. John's, and she went to it without

any more prevision of what was to happen than a babe unborn.

It was the first time that Charlotte had been away from her, and she was blaming herself bitterly. Perhaps self-reproach was never more sharp than Mrs. Darling's as she paced the drawing-room this night. It seemed to her, now, that she might have foreseen something of the sort; that she should have kept her attractive daughter under her own eye. But she thought she had taken every precaution; she had charged Mary Anne not to admit gentlemen as visitors during her absence—unless, she had added, they were of a certain standing, as to age, and married. Some few she had especially interdicted by name. Above all others would she have interdicted Mr. St. John of Alnwick, had she supposed that this would be the result; and she mentally heaped the most bitter reproaches on Mary Anne, and felt that she should like to shake her.

She turned to the bell with a sudden impulse, and rang it; indeed, Mrs. Darling was an impulsive-mannered woman. All the servants had gone up-stairs on Mrs. Darling's entrance, except the lady's-maid; hours were early in the quiet household. She came in: a slender woman of

five-and-thirty, with dark eyes and brownish marks on her thin face; she wore a neat grey alpaca gown and small white linen wristbands and collar. A woman devoted to her mistress's interests, but disliked by the servants, who went the length of calling her a "deceitful cat." But Mary Prance was a clever woman, and not deceitful on the whole. She gratefully liked Mrs. Darling, who was always kind to her, and she loved the eldest daughter; but she cared for nobody else in the wide world. She entered the service as housemaid, a young girl, but her mistress had called her "Prance" from the first. Mrs. Darling—you remember the hint I gave you—could not call her servants by their simple christian names. She turned sharply round as the door opened.

"Where's Miss Darling?"

"Miss Darling has been in bed some time, ma'am. She went at eight o'clock."

Mrs. Darling might have guessed it. Mary Anne Darling was subject to attacks of sore-throat, and they had left her rather seriously indisposed with one when they set off for the fête that day.

"It was a little better this evening," added

Prance. "But she went to bed early, and I took her a cup of gruel. She—"

"Prance, who has visited here during my absence?" interrupted Mrs. Darling, impatiently drowning the words. "What gentlemen?"

The lady's-maid considered for a moment, recalling the visitors.

"Dr. Graves, ma'am; he has come the oftenest, I think; and Mr. Pym, and old Sir William—"

"Not these old people, Prance; I don't care to hear about them," said Mrs. Darling, peevishly. "I mean young men—single men."

"Not any, I think," answered Prance, after a pause. "Miss Darling was denied to them."

"Mr. St. John of Alnwick has come?"

"Oh yes, Mr. St. John has come. He has come often."

"What business had Mary Anne to admit him! What business had Mary Anne to admit him when she was denied to others!" reiterated Mrs. Darling. But the words were spoken mentally, not aloud in the maid's hearing, and she suddenly quitted the room for the chamber of her unconsciously offending daughter.

The poor girl woke up, hot and startled at the unexpected entrance of Mrs. Darling; at the

sharp questions that so rudely assailed her ear. Not for some few moments did she understand, so as to answer.

Mr. Carleton St. John? Yes, he had been there rather frequently in the past few weeks. Had Charlotte had opportunities of seeing him alone? Yes, very likely she had; it might be so.

"Did you know," resumed Mrs. Darling, suppressing the storm of reproaches so ready to break from her lips, "that any attachment was arising between her and Mr. St. John?"

"No, mamma, I never knew it," replied Mary Anne, fully awake now. "I did not think of such a thing. *Has* it arisen?"

"Yes, it has arisen, you unhappy, careless creature, and I fear that she's going to marry him," retorted Mrs. Darling. "You are a hundred years older than Charlotte in staid experience. I entrusted her to your charge here as I might a younger sister, and you have suffered her to meet George St. John, and this is the result! I shall never forgive you, Mary Anne. Did I not warn you that I would have no single men calling here during my absence?"

"But—but—Mr. St. John is not a single man," returned the unfortunate Mary Anne, too be-



wildered to collect her sober senses. "I'm sure I did not think of him as anything but a mourning widower; it seems but the other day that his wife died. I did not think of him at all as a marrying man."

Neither, in point of fact, had Mrs. Darling, or she might have expressly interdicted his visits by name, as she had those of others.

Mary Anne Darling was gathering her wits. She sat up in bed, thinking possibly that might help her. "Mamma, you *cannot* really expect to keep Charlotte unmarried! Remember her beauty. If it were me or Margaret, you might——"

"You or Margaret!" screamed Mrs. Darling, excessively incensed at something or other in the words. "I wish you were both going to be married to-morrow! or to-night, for the matter of that."

"I was going to ask you, mamma," pursued Mary Anne, meek still in spite of the covert sneer, "what objection you can possibly have to her marrying Mr. St. John?"

"That's my business, and not yours," said Mrs. Darling, tartly.

Mary Anne had never heard her mother alto-

gether so cross, never seen her so vexed, and the girl wondered excessively. Hitherto she had supposed the objection that existed to Charlotte's marrying, and which she had not failed to detect did exist, arose from an idea on her mother's part that no one likely to present himself was worthy of Miss Norris in a worldly point of view. But surely this could not apply to Mr. St. John of Alnwick ! She spoke again, pursuing the train of thought.

"He will be Sir George St. John sometime, mamma ; he will be more wealthy than he is now. It is surely a higher match than even Charlotte could have looked for."

"I'd give every shilling I possess in the world, rather than Charlotte should marry him !" spoke Mrs. Darling in a low, determined tone ; "I'd sacrifice half the years I have yet to live, to keep her with me always ! I shall never forgive you, Mary Anne. When you found that George St. John was taking to come here, you ought to have written me word."

"Mamma, listen. I have told you that I never thought of such a thing as that Mr. Carleton St. John came, or could come, with any such idea ; he, who has only just lost his wife ; but if

I had thought it, if I had known it, what would have been my will against Charlotte's? It might have pleased her that he should be admitted; and you know you have taught us to give way to her in all things."

"Then you might have written to me. I repeat to you, Mary Anne, that I shall never forgive you."

"It must be, that he was previously married—that Charlotte's children will not inherit," cried Mary Anne, speaking aloud in her puzzled wonder, as she strove to find reasonable grounds for the objection to Mr. St. John. "But——"

"Hold your tongue," interrupted Mrs. Darling. "You have done mischief enough, without seeking to know reasons that may not be disclosed."

More and more surprised grew Mary Anne. The last words were not spoken in reproach, in anger, but in a tone of deep, bitter pain. They bore a sound of wailing, of lamentation; and she could only stare after her mother in silence, as Mrs. Darling quitted the room not less abruptly than she had entered it.

Mary Anne Darling lay down again, and curled the clothes round her with a pettish movement, feeling excessively aggrieved. But that was no-

thing new. She and Margaret had suffered all their lives through Charlotte, and had never rebelled. Miss Norris had been first and foremost; had received all the love, all the consideration, all the care; the house had only seemed to go on in reference to the well-being, the convenience of its eldest daughter.

Brought up to this from their earliest years, Mary Anne and Margaret Darling had accepted it as one of life's obligations. But the young lady was feeling now that she was being censured unjustly. If there did exist any objection to Mr. Carleton St. John, Charlotte should be blamed for falling in love with him, or else made to relinquish him. But Miss Darling did not believe in any objection: she thought her mother only wished to keep Charlotte to herself in her jealous affection,—that she could not bear to part with her.

"I never knew anything so unreasonable," grumbled the young lady, giving the pillow a fierce poke upwards. "Charlotte was sure to marry sometime, in spite of all, and but for her mother's great watchfulness, she'd have been married before this. I *cannot* understand mamma. What though Charlotte *is* the apple of her eye, ought she to wish to prevent her fulfilling wo-

man's proper destiny? The love of most mothers causes them to wish their daughters to marry; some to the length of scheming for it: in this case it is schemed against. It is very selfish, very inconsistent; and yet mamma's not a selfish woman! I can't understand her. Charlotte was one certain to marry; and I hope it's George St. John that will get her, for I like him!"

Mrs. Darling's opposition was not yet over. She sat the next day in her own room, thinking what an ill-used woman she was, calling up every little remembered petty cross of her past life; as many of us are prone to do in moments of annoyance, when things wear an aspect of gloom. She had married—a girl not out of her teens—Mr. Norris, of Norris Court, a gentleman whose standing in the county was nearly as good as that of the St. Johns of Alnwick. But ere she had well realised her position as the wife of a wealthy man, the mistress of a place so charming as was Norris Court; ere, indeed, her baby was born, Mr. Norris died, and the whole thing seemed to pass from her as a dream. Had the child proved a boy she had been well off, and Norris Court still been hers to reside at; proving a girl, it lapsed from her to the next male heir in

the entail. She turned out of it with her baby, the little Charlotte, and a small income of a few hundreds a year. These hundreds, at her own death, would be Charlotte's. The pretty house she had since called her home was in point of fact Charlotte's, not hers. It had come to Charlotte on her fathers' death, but she had it to reside in during her life. Norris Court was two miles distant, further away from Alnwick; and Mrs. Norris in her young widowhood had quarrelled with its new possessors, and the breach had never been healed, so that Charlotte was a stranger to her forefathers' home. Save for this cottage and the few hundreds a year, all in expectancy, Charlotte Norris had nothing. How Mrs. Norris had bewailed these past untoward circumstances, her own heart alone knew.

Her subsequent marriage with Colonel Darling had not greatly improved her circumstances in the long run. At the Colonel's death, the chief portion of what he had, passed to their son: a little was settled on the daughters, and Mrs. Darling had some benefit for her life. But altogether her income was not a very large one, considering her many wants, and that she was not one who could make a sovereign go far; it was

not large at all, and Mrs. Darling was in the habit of thinking that fate might have been kinder to her. In the lost glories of Norris Court, present benefits, real and desirable though they were, were overlooked. But for these comparisons, bred of discontent, some of us would get on better in the world.

She sat in her own room, glancing back at these past grievances, dwelling on others more recent. It was the day following the fête. The interview with Mr. Carleton St. John was over, and Charlotte was his promised wife. Mrs. Darling had done what she could to oppose it—to the secret surprise of Mr. St. John; but her opposition was untenable, and had broken down. “If you have any real, tangible objection to me, name it, and let me combat it as I best may,” said Mr. St. John. But apparently Mrs. Darling could bring forward none, save the foolishly fond one that she could not part with Charlotte; and the engagement took place. As Mrs. Darling sat now, alone, her mind was busy with a hundred wild schemes for its frustration still.

But she saw clearly, as though the future were reflected in the mirror before her, that they would

all be worse than useless ; that unless some special interposition of Providence interposed, Charlotte would go to Alnwick.

What was the secret of her opposition? Ah, my friendly reader, you must read through many pages yet, ere you arrive at that. She had one very great and good reason for dreading the marriage of her daughter with George St. John of Alnwick : and in the midst of her conviction that it *would* be, she was, even now, scheming to prevent it.

Charlotte happened to come into the room as she sat. An impulse prompted Mrs. Darling to try one means at once. She held out her hand ; and Charlotte—who might have looked radiant with happiness but that she and her countenance were of an undemonstrative nature in general—came and sat on a stool at her feet, her dress of bright mauve muslin floating around, her delicate hands raised from their open lace sleeves to her mother's knee.

"I must say a few words to you, Charlotte. Promise to hear me patiently and calmly."

"Of course I will, mamma."

"There's no of course in the matter, I fear. Times have been, Charlotte, when——"



"Oh mamma, never mind all that. I'm going to be good. Tell me what it is."

"Do you remember, some three years ago—yes, it must be quite three years now, for we did not leave London that year until August—that we saw a good deal of George St. John? We had met him often in London that season; we met him on our return here; and he got into the habit of calling on us once or twice a week."

"I remember," replied Charlotte; for Mrs. Darling had stopped, as if waiting for an answer.

"The beginning of October we left home for Paris; a sudden resolution on my part, you girls thought; which was true. Charlotte, I must tell you now why I went: I was moving you from danger; I was carrying you away from George St. John."

A momentary glance upwards of Charlotte's eyes. Did Mrs. Darling read anger in them? That something made her quail, there was no doubt, and she laid firm hold of both those slender wrists, resting on her knee.

"For your sake, Charlotte; it was for your sake. I feared you were growing to love him."

"And what if I were?" retorted Charlotte.

There was a long pause. Mrs. Darling ap-

peared to be weighing some question with herself: she looked anxious, troubled, indecisive: but she still held the hands with a sure grasp.

"Charlotte, I want you to trust me. There is a reason, a cause, why you should not become the wife of Mr. Carleton of Alnwick; but I cannot tell you what it is, I cannot so much as hint at its nature. I want you to trust in me that this cause does exist; and to act upon it."

"To act upon it?"

"By declining to become Mrs. Carleton St. John."

"No," said Charlotte, very quietly. "What is the cause?"

"My darling, I have said that I cannot tell it you: and that is why I ask you to trust to me, as confidently as you did when a little child. The thought came over me just now, while Mr. Carleton was here, to speak openly to him: the next moment I felt faint and sick with dread at the bare thought. I may not tell Mr. Carleton; I will not tell you——"

"I do wish you'd not call him by that name!" Charlotte interrupted.

"My dear, it is that I have got into the habit of it," murmured Mrs. Darling.

"It's like a scene in a play," exclaimed Charlotte. "I may not marry George St. John on account of some secret reason, and I may not know what the reason is! He is not going to turn out my brother, or cousin, I suppose? Rather romantic, that, for these matter-of-fact days!"

"Oh Charlotte, be serious! Do not indulge in nonsense now. You know that you are Charlotte Norris, and that he is George St. John; and that you never were related yet. It is not that: I wish it was! I might speak out then."

"What is it?"

"I cannot tell you, Charlotte. I cannot; I cannot."

"Have you heard anything against him, that you are concealing?"

Mrs. Darling lifted her hand to her face, partially hiding it. She did not answer the question.

"Charlotte, you know how I love you. Well, I would almost rather see you die, than married to George St. John. No mother ever schemed to get her daughter a husband, as I schemed three years ago to keep you from one, when my sus-

pitions were aroused that you were in danger of loving George St. John."

"The danger was over and past," said Charlotte, in a low tone. "I did love him."

"My poor girl! And *his* love, though I did not know it then, was given to Caroline Carleton——"

"Don't say it!" interrupted Charlotte: and for the second time during their interview Mrs. Darling quailed, the tone was so wild, so full of pain. "I do not wish to be spoken to of his first wife," she added, calmly, after a pause.

"You will not, surely, be his second, Charlotte! Charlotte, my Charlotte!—You will not break my heart!"

"You will break mine, if you forbid me to marry Mr. St. John," was the whispered answer. "But indeed, mamma, I think we are talking nonsense," broke off Charlotte. "I am no longer a child. I am nearly nine and twenty; and that's rather too old to be told I may not marry, when there's no real cause why I should not."

"No real cause! What have I been saying, Charlotte?"

"I think there is none. I think what you are saying must be a chimera."

"I have not made any impression on you, then!" Charlotte gave no answer.

Mrs. Darling let fall the hands she held; she had only hoped against hope. Charlotte rose and bent over her mother to kiss her, whispering a few decisive words. Cruel words to her mother's heart.

"It is of no use to try to separate us, mamma. You did enough mischief in separating us before—but until this hour, I knew not that you acted intentionally. But for that, I might have been—yes, I might!—his first wife, chosen before all."

Charlotte Norris was wrong, so far: Mr. St. John's love had never before been given to her. It was not given to her now, as it had been to Caroline Carleton: the first fresh green of the heart's spring had had its day, and was gone for ever.

A few more days; another attempt or two, futile as this; a short, sharp battle with her secret wishes, and Mrs. Darling gave up opposition, and grew reconciled to what she could not prevent. And in the mid-winter, just after the new year came in, the newspapers had another piece of news to relate, concerning Mr. St. John.


“On the 2nd of January, at the church of St. Mary, Alnwick, by the Rev. Dr. Graves, George Carleton St. John, Esq., of Alnwick Hall, to Charlotte Augusta, only child of the late Herbert Norris, Esq., of Norris Court.”

## CHAPTER IV.

### A NEW MISTRESS AT ALNWICK.

THE mourning habiliments for some time hitherto prevailing at Alnwick Hall, were put aside during the wedding tour of its master, and the servants appeared in gayer colours. Master Benja's grey merino frock was exchanged for a flaming scarlet, and the black sash and sleeve-knots were replaced by white. Benja was a sturdy little fellow of fourteen months now, sufficiently forward in walking to get about the room and bring himself into all manner of mischief.

A second marriage, a new mistress suddenly brought to an established home, rarely gives pleasure to its inmates. This applies, in an especial degree, to its female servants. Whatever the cause may be, or whence it is that the feeling in the jealous human heart takes its rise, it is an indisputable fact, that the second marriage of a



master is rarely liked, that the new bride is regarded with anything but love. The case was such at the Hall. Tritton, the housekeeper, had lived in the family of Miss Carleton before she was Mrs. St. John, had come with her to the Hall when she married; and it was only natural perhaps that she should look upon her successor somewhat in the light of a usurper. Honour shared the feeling: ardently attached to her young charge, having been *trusted* with him, possessing nearly full control over him, the prospect of a new mother for the boy, of a mistress for herself, could not be palatable. But both Tritton and Honour were conscientious, good women, and there's no doubt this feeling would have soon worn itself out, but for circumstances that occurred to fan it.

Mrs. Darling was not wise: her intentions no doubt were good, but her judgment was not. From the day following that of the ceremony, when Mr. and Mrs. St. John were fairly away, Mrs. Darling haunted the Hall. Anxious for the comfort of Charlotte as she had never been for anything in her life, she fell into the mistake of interfering with Charlotte's future home before she entered upon it. She went about the house



like a walking ghost, peering here, peeping there ; she had changes wrought in the rooms, in the furniture ; she found fault with the arrangements made by the servants, who had done their best, and superseded them at will. She changed the position of beds, she examined linen, she went so far as to alter one or two domestic arrangements, she turned Benja and Honour from their day nursery into another ; she ordered this done, she countermanded that. This might have been tolerated in Mrs. Darling ; indeed it must have been ; but what the servants could not and would not tolerate, was a second edition of it in Prance. Prance accompanied her mistress to the Hall generally, one or two nights was left there to sleep ; Mrs. Darling's worrying orders were often transmitted through Prance ; and Prance, equally unwise with her mistress, assumed a supercilious superiority (which indeed was partially her natural manner) excessively distasteful to Mr. St. John's rather indulged but most respectable household.

It was a sad mistake : it was perhaps the small, commencing link in a heavy chain, whose fetters would have to be worn for ever. Mrs. Darling ought to have waited until her daughter came home, she could then have suggested these altera-


tions privately to her, if she deemed them so essential, and suffered Charlotte's own authority to carry them out. How Mrs. Darling, a shrewd, sensible, easy woman in general, came to fall into the error, must remain a marvel. It caused the servants to look upon her as a meddling, underbred, sharp woman, who was interfering in a most unjustifiable manner in what did not concern her. She was really nothing of the sort; it all arose from her surpassing anxiety for the comfort of Charlotte.

This, I say, must have been borne from Mrs. Darling; but when that unfortunate Prance came in, all the resentment was turned upon her. Prance ordered after her mistress; worse still, she did not order as from her mistress, but as from herself; and her covert, cold, you-must-obey-me tone, exasperated the maids at the Hall nearly to rebellion. Putting present ill-feeling apart, the result was unfortunate: for it served to create a prejudice against their new mistress, whom none of them, except Honour, had yet seen. Mrs. St. John would perhaps be able to live that down: but the other result never could or would be lived down, so long as the Hall and the world should last—the feeling of resentful

dislike against Mary Prance. Altogether, what with the advent of the new wife, the perpetual visitation of Mrs. Darling, and the hatred to Prance, Alnwick Hall was kept in a state of internal commotion.

Amidst this, the day came round for the return of Mr. St. John and his bride. In the afternoon, Master Benja, in apple-pie order, the short scarlet frock on and the white ribbons—for they were expected to arrive every hour—was toddling about the nursery, drawing a horse. Honour, in a new cap with white satin trimming, sat watching him, and talking to one of the housemaids, Edy, who had looked in for a gossip.

It may be as well that you should notice how these nursery rooms were situated. They were on the *side* of the house facing the east. Mr. Carleton's bedroom was at the end, looking front, on the park, and forming as it were the angle on that side the house: you saw the room once; some one was dying in it. His room opened to two others, one on either side it; the one looking to the front was his own dressing-room; the other looking to the side, had been called the dressing-room of the late Mrs. St. John; and all three of the rooms likewise opened to the gallery.



It was this last room that had been made the nursery of Benja, and out of which Mrs. Darling had turned him. The next room to this, shut in as it were by itself, inasmuch as it opened to no other room, was the new day nursery; Honour and Benja are in it now; and beyond it, the last room on this side the house, was the one in which Honour and Benja slept. The next to this, the first one looking to the north at the back of the house, was Mrs. Tritton's—but it is of no consequence to mention that. The passage in which the doors of these nurseries were situated was narrow, not like the wide handsome front corridor or gallery; which, by the way, was carpeted with the richest carpet and lined with paintings; and immediately opposite to the door of Benja's bed-chamber was the back staircase used by the servants. Honour, with her charge, was the only one of them who assumed the privilege of passing up and down the front. It was as well to mention this: you will see why, later. Honour had resented bitterly the being turned from the nursery. It was most unreasonable that she should do so (though perhaps not unnatural), as the room would be required for the next Mrs. St. John.


She was gossiping with the housemaid in the manner that servants like to gossip, when a voice in the next room startled them both. It was the voice of Prance; and the servants had not known she was in the house.

"There's that woman here again!" exclaimed Edy, below her breath.

Honour had her finger to her lip in the attitude of listening. She wondered to whom Prance was talking. Tones that could not be mistaken for any one's but Mrs. Darling's, answered her. In point of fact Mrs. Darling had come over to receive her daughter, bringing Prance to carry a few last trifling belongings of Charlotte's.

"Of course!" ejaculated Honour. "I knew *they'd* be here."

Honour was good in the main; sincere, thoroughly trustworthy; but she was not exempt from the prejudice to which her class is especially prone. You cannot help these things. It was her custom, whenever she found Mrs. Darling and her maid appeared up-stairs, to catch up Benja and dart down to the housekeeper's room, with a vague feeling, arising from her prejudiced resentment, of carrying Benja out of their reach. She took him up now, horse and all, and was



making her way to the back stairs when Mrs. Darling suddenly looked out of a chamber and called to her.

There could be no pretending not to hear. She had been seen, and therefore was obliged to arrest her steps. It had not come to open rebellion against Mrs. Darling.

"I want you, Honour. Step here a minute."

"Carry the baby down, Edy," whispered Honour, giving her the child. "Tell Mrs. Tritton that they are up here; if she does not know it," she added, as a parting fling.

When Edy reached the housekeeper's room, she found it empty, except for the presence of a stranger in black, who sat there with her things on, and who laid summary hold of the baby, as if she had a right to him. It was the nurse, Mrs. Dade, who had come occasionally to see the child, as she had opportunity: Edy, but a few months in the service, did not recognise her. She willingly resigned the charge, and made her way to the hall as fast as her feet could carry her: for a bustle in it warned her that their new mistress had arrived, and all her woman's curiosity was aroused.

She was crossing the hall on Mr. St. John's

arm, a smile of greeting on her pale face as she glanced to the right and the left. Mr. St. John laughed and talked, and mentioned two or three of the principal servants by name to his wife. Edy stood in a nook behind the rest, and peeped out ; and just then Mrs. Darling, having become aware of the arrival, came running down the stairs with loud words of welcome.

The bustle over, Mrs. Tritton went back to her own room, shutting the door upon Edy. Nurse Dade had the boy on her knee, talking to him ; and Honour, a privileged visitor to it, came in. Honour's tongue could be rather an explosive one on occasion ; but the unexpected sight of the nurse arrested it for the moment.

"I should not have come up to-day, had I known," Nurse Dade was saying to the house-keeper. "It must be a busy day with you."

"Middling for that : not very. You heard of the marriage, I suppose ? "

"I saw it in the newspapers. I had not heard of it till then. I have been away for six months, you see, and news came to me slowly. My poor lady died, after all. But there was no hope of her from the first. And she was old : seventy the day before she died."

"Have you given up monthly nursing?"

"Not at all. I take whichever offers. This last place was very liberal to me; gave me two full suits of mourning. How well this little fellow gets on, Honour! You have done your part by him; that's certain."

Honour gave a sort of ungracious grunt by way of answer. "What do you think she wanted with me?" she began, turning to the house-keeper, and alluding to Mrs. Darling. "You know that pretty sketch that master drew of Benja in the straw hat, one day in the garden, and hung it up in his bedroom? Well, she called me in to say she thought it had better be taken down and put elsewhere. I told her I must decline to meddle with my master's things, and especially with that, though it was done only on the old leaf of a copy-book; and I wouldn't touch it. She first looked at me and then at the sketch; but just then there was the bustle in the hall; she ran down and I came away."

"And it's left hanging?"

"It's left hanging. Ah!"—and Honour drew a long breath that was half a groan—"Nurse Dade, we've got changes here."



"There's changes everywhere, I think," responded the nurse. "But I must say I was surprised when I read it in the papers. So soon! and to recollect what his grief was *then*! But law! it's the way of the world."

Honour took Benja, carried him to the far part of the room, and began amusing him with his horse. They made some considerable amount of noise, nearly drowning the voices of the two women left by the fire.

"Do you happen to know her?" the housekeeper had asked, and the nurse knew by intuition that she spoke of the bride.

"I've known her ever since she was a baby. My mother was nursing at Norris Court, and I went there for a day and a night, and they let me hold the baby on my lap, to say I had had it. I was quite a young woman then; a growing girl, as one may say."

"I don't know anything of her, hardly," said the housekeeper; "I've not chosen to ask questions of the servants, and I and Honour, as you are aware, are strangers in the neighbourhood. Her father was a colonel, was he not?"

"A colonel! No; it was Mrs. Norris's second husband that was a colonel—Colonel Darling.

Miss Norris's father was Mr. Norris of Norris Court. Very grand, rich people they were: but as there was no boy, it nearly all went from the widow when Mr. Norris died. She married Colonel Darling when the first year was out."

"She must have been very young," remarked the housekeeper. "She does not look old now."

"Very young. I remember the first time I saw her in her widow's cap. I began wondering how *I* should look in a widow's cap, for she did not look much older than I was. She was very pretty. People said what a pity it was Mr. Norris should have died so soon and left her."

"What did Mr. Norris die of?"

"I can't tell you. I have never known. There was some mystery about it. My mother always said she did not know: and I don't think she did, she was so curious over it. He was ill about a week or ten days, but nobody was let go near him, except Mr. Pym and the valet, and a man nurse they had. Some of the servants thought it was some infectious disorder: but nobody knew."

"And he died like that?"

"He died like that. The little baby, Miss Charlotte, as she was named afterwards, was

born while he lay ill. My mother said Mr. Pym took her in to show her to her father; which was very wrong if it was fever; and when Mr. Pym came out his face was white, as if he had gone through some painful scene. Mr. Norris died the next day."

The housekeeper, who was by no means one to deal in mysteries, stared at the nurse. She had dropped her voice to that covert tone we are apt to use when speaking of things that must not be discussed openly: she sat gazing at the fire, as if recalling the past, the black strings of her untied bonnet hanging straight down.

"How do you mean, Mrs. Dade?"

The question seemed to recall her to the present, and she took her eyes from the fire.

"Mean?"

"You speak as if you were scared."

"Do I? I suppose I caught the tone from mother: she used to speak so when she talked of it. It was her way, when there was any sort of mystery in her places. Whether she came to the bottom of it herself, or whether she didn't, she always used a tone in speaking of it that partly scared you and partly sent you rampant to know more."

"But what mystery could there be in regard to Mr. Norris?"

"That's just what I am unable to tell you. There *was* a mystery: everybody knew that; but I don't believe anybody fathomed it. Whether it lay in his illness, or in his death, or in neither, mother never knew. Sometimes she thought it was connected with his wife. They had been a loving couple until one night, when some dispute occurred between them, and there ensued an awful quarrel: one of those dreadful disturbances that terrify a household. Mrs. Norris, a gentle, loving, merry young girl, she had seemed until then, dashed her hand through a cheval glass in her passion, and cut it terribly. It all took place in their own room. Mr. Pym was fetched; and altogether there was a fine hullabaloo."

"Were you there?"

"I was not there; nor mother either. It was not for some days afterwards that she was sent for to Mrs. Norris: but the servants told her of it. Mr. Norris had been ill ever since; and three days later he was dead. The butler said—and he no doubt had it from the valet, for they were great friends—that it was that night's quarrel that killed his master."

"How could the quarrel kill him?" cried the wondering housekeeper.

Nurse Dade shook her head. "I don't know. All sorts of things were said—as things in such cases often are, and perhaps not a word of truth in any of 'em. At any rate Mr. Norris died, and nobody knew for certain how he died or what was the matter with him, or what could have given rise to the dreadful quarrel that led to it. There were but two persons who could have told the truth—Mrs. Norris and Mr. Pym."

"Mr. Pym must have been a young man then," observed the housekeeper, after a pause.

"About thirty, I suppose. He must be sixty now."

"Mr. Pym's not sixty!" was the answering exclamation.

"He is hard upon it, though. Nobody would take him for it; he is so active. Mrs. Norris had to leave the Court when she got well, for the new people to come to it; and she has lived at times since, at that house she's in now, which of right belongs to Miss Charlotte—I should say Mrs. St. John."

"I hope she's amiable?" observed the housekeeper, catching at the last words only.

"She is when she likes, I believe. I don't know much of her myself. She has got a temper, they say—but then she has been so much indulged."

"She is very handsome. But she's not in the least like Mrs. Darling."

"She is very much like her father. Mrs. Darling's fair, Mr. Norris was——"

A clear, sonorous voice, calling "Benja," interrupted the words. Honour heard it, for it penetrated even through the shouts of the boy and the creaking of the steed's wheels. It was a call she was accustomed to: often and often, in passing through the hall, going out or coming in, had Mr. St. John thus summoned his child.

"Not the horse," said Honour to the boy, as she picked him up. "Papa's calling. Benja shall come back to the horse by and by."

Mr. St. John was in the hall, waiting. He took the child from Honour, kissed him lovingly many times, and then carried him into the drawing-room. Honour followed: she had not been told to go down, and there was an irrepressible curiosity in her mind to see Mrs. St. John.

She was seated alone, near the window, with a

work-box before her and some embroidery in her hand, looking as much at home as though she had always lived there. Her raven-black hair was partially turned from her forehead, showing off the finely-cut but very thin features. Turning her head quickly at the opening of the door, she saw her husband enter.

"I have brought you Benja, Charlotte. He must make acquaintance with his mamma."

She rose with a smile, her dark-blue silk dress gleaming brightly from its ample folds, met them mid-way in the room, and caught Benja. The boy, rather taken aback perhaps at the summary proceeding, stared at her from his wide-open great grey eyes.

"You will love mamma, Benja?" she said, kissing him tenderly; and she placed him on her knee and held up to him her shining gold chain, as she had done some two or three months before. "Mamma means to love Benja."

But Benja was impervious to bribes to-day, and would have nothing to say to the gold chain. Suddenly, in the midst of his prolonged stare, he burst into tears, with a great deal of unnecessary noise.

"I am strange to him," said Mrs. St. John.

"He will know me better in a day or two. See! what have I got for Benja!"

She took up a sweet biscuit from a plate that happened to be on the table. What with the biscuit, what with her persuasive words, her kisses, Benja suffered himself to be coaxed, forgot his sobs, and kissed his new mamma.

"Friends from this minute," she said triumphantly, glancing up at her husband, who had stood by smiling. "I will try and be a good mother to him, George."

"I shall like her better than I thought," decided Honour from the door, who could find no fault, even in her prejudice, with her new mistress. "I shall like her much if she will only love the child."

And thus the future lady of Alnwick had entered on her home.



## CHAPTER V.

### ON ST. MARTIN'S EVE.

"AT Alnwick Hall, on St. Martin's Eve, the wife of George Carleton St. John, Esq., of a son."

This was the next announcement in the local papers; some ten months, or a trifle more, having elapsed since the last one. And I hope you will have patience with these notices, and not find fault at their frequency: they are not yet over.

"On St. Martin's Eve!" Was Mr. Carleton St. John a Roman Catholic, that he should chronicle the birth of his children by the saints' days? No. And it was not by Mr. St. John's wish that it had been so worded, but by Mrs. Darling's.

It was no doubt a somewhat singular coincidence that this second child should have been born on the same day as Benja, the 10th of

November. Mrs. Darling, who was sojourning temporarily at Alnwick Hall, and was naturally a little inclined to be superstitious, regarded it as a most ominous event. What if the advent of this child should be succeeded by the dreadful tragedy that had so fatally characterised the last? she asked herself: and it would perhaps hardly be believed, but that some of you may have had opportunities of witnessing these foolish fancies, that she dreaded for the announcement to be made in the newspapers in the same words that the last had been.

"I cannot bear it," she said to Mr. St. John, "I could not look at it without a shudder. Put anything else you like, but don't put 'On the 10th of November!'"

Mr. St. John laughed outright; he could not help it. "Charlotte is as well as she can be," he rejoined.

"I know; but a change might take place at any moment. Pray do not laugh at me, Mr. St. John. Call it folly; superstition, if you will; only don't word this announcement as you worded the last."

"But how am I to word it?" he asked. "If the child was born on the tenth, I can't put the

ninth or the eleventh. I'll not send any notice at all, if you like; I don't care about it."

"Not send any notice of Charlotte's child!" she echoed in displeasure. "That would be a slight."

"As you please. But you see the little fellow has chosen to come on the tenth, and we can't send him back again to wait for a more convenient day."

"Put 'On St. Martin's Eve,' said Mrs. Darling, after a pause of somewhat blank consideration.

"St. Martin's Eve!"

"Yes; why not? It is St. Martin's Eve, you know."

"Indeed I don't know," returned Mr. St. John, very much amused. "I'm not sure that I knew we had a Saint Martin in the calendar."

"That comes of your having lived so much in England. The English pay no attention to the saints' days. I have been abroad a good deal with my children, and know them all. St. Martin's is a great day in some parts of France. Please let it be so worded, Mr. St. John."

He took a pen and wrote it as she desired, laughing much. "I should like to see Dr.

Graves's eyes when he reads this," quoth he, as he put it into the envelope.

"A rubbishing old Low Churchman!" slightly spoke Mrs. Darling. "He's nobody."

So the notice was sent off; and in due time came back to the house in the newspapers. Mrs. Darling carried one up-stairs proudly to her daughter.

"See, Charlotte! How well it looks!"

Mrs. St. John took the paper in her delicate hand and read it in silence; read it twice.

"How came George to put it in like that—'St. Martin's Eve?'"

"Because I requested it. You are quite well now, darling, as may be said: but I would not have the announcement made to the world in the same words as the last."

"It never could have been so made, mamma."

"Yes it could. Were not the two children born on the same day of the year?"

"Oh, that," coldly returned Mrs. St. John, as if the fact were not worth a thought. "The other had an addition which this must lack. It ran in this way: 'the wife of George Carleton St. John, of a son *and heir*.'"

Mrs. Darling made no rejoinder. But she

cast a keen, stealthy glance at Charlotte from time to time, as she busied herself with some trifle at a distance.

Things had gone on very smoothly at the Hall during the past few months. Mrs. St. John had been at least kind to Benja, sufficiently loving in manner; and Honour liked her new mistress tolerably well. The girl's feeling towards her may best be described as a negative one; neither like nor dislike. She did not dislike her as she had formerly believed she should do; and she did not very much like her.

Perhaps if there had been a characteristic ever more prominent than another in the disposition of Charlotte Norris, it was jealousy. Mrs. Darling had been obliged to see this—and to see it exercised, too—during the course of her daughter's past life; and one of her objections to the master of Alnwick Hall, as a husband for Charlotte, was the fact that he had been once married and his heir was already born. That Charlotte would be desperately jealous of the little Benja, should she bear a son of her own, jealous perhaps to hatred, Mrs. Darling felt sure of: she devoutly hoped there would be no children; and an uncomfortable feeling had been

upon her from the hour she learnt there was a prospect of it. So long as Charlotte was without a son, there could be no very formidable jealousy of Benja. But there might be afterwards.

Certainly, there existed a wide margin of difference between the future of the two-year old boy, sturdily stamping about the gravel-path underneath, the great St. Bernard's dog, "Brave," harnessed with twine before him; and that of the young infant lying in the cradle by the fire-side. Many a mother, far more gentle and self-abnegating than was Charlotte St. John, might have felt a pang in contemplating the contrast. Benja had a title in prospective; he would be exceedingly rich amidst the rich. George (by that name the infant was already registered) might count his future income by a few poor hundreds. The greater portion of the Alnwick estate (not a very large one) was strictly entailed; and the large fortune brought to Mr. St. John by his first wife, was now Benja's. Mr. St. John would probably have wished to do as well by one child as by the other, but he could not help himself; he could not alter the existing state of things. The settlement he had been enabled to make on Miss Norris was very, very small; but he looked

to redeem this by putting by yearly some of his large income for her and her children. Still the contrast was great, and Mrs. Darling knew that Charlotte was dwelling upon it with bitterness, when she laid that emphasis just now on the "*son and heir*."

That Mrs. St. John would inordinately love this child of hers, there was no doubt—far more so than might be well for herself or for him. Mrs. Darling saw it as she lay there—lay looking with eager, watchful eyes at the little face in the cradle; and Mrs. Darling decided within herself—it may have been from experience—that such love does not bring peace in its wake. "I wish it had been a girl!" thought Mrs. Darling.

Charlotte Norris had all her life been subject to take likes and dislikes—occasionally violent ones; and she took a strong dislike to the nurse that was now in attendance upon her. Instead of being checked by her mother, this was humoured, indulged—as her prejudices always had been. It might not have mattered in the present, but it eventually led to circumstances that were destined to bear unfortunate fruit. The nurse (it was not Nurse Dade) was partially banished from the sick room, and Prance, who was at the

Hall with her mistress, took her place in it. The consequence was, that when, at a fortnight's end, Mrs. Darling quitted the Hall, she was obliged to leave Prance behind her, who could not be spared; and the final result of it all was, that Prance left Mrs. Darling's service, and remained at the Hall as nurse to the infant.

And now we must go on a few months.

The spring came round. Mr. Carleton St. John, who was in Parliament, had to be in London; but his wife remained at Alnwick. The baby seemed delicate, and London was not deemed good for him as compared with the country; but Mrs. St. John intended to accompany her husband up after Easter. Without the child? Nay, not to have brought to herself all the good in the world, would she have stirred without him. The frail little infant of a few days had become to her the greatest treasure earth ever gave; her love for him was of that wild, impassioned, all-absorbing nature, known, it is hoped, but to few, for it never visits a well-regulated heart.

And in proportion to her love for her own child, grew her jealousy of Benja—nay, not jealousy only, but dislike. Mrs. Darling had fore-



seen correctly: the jealousy and the dislike had come—the hatred would but too surely follow. Charlotte strove against this feeling; she knew how wrong it was, how disloyal to her husband, how cruel to Benja; and she fought against it well. She would take Benja on her knee and fondle him; and the child grew to love her, to run in to her at all minutes when he could triumphantly escape from Honour, and she would lay hold of him and pretend to hide him, and tell Honour to go into the woods and see if the little wild boy had flown thither. It's true, that once or twice, upon some very slight provocation, she had fallen into a storm of passion that had literally rendered Honour motionless with alarm, seizing the little boy somewhat after the manner of a tiger, and beating him furiously. Honour and Benja were alike scared; even Prance looked on aghast.

Matters were not mended by the two nurses. If dislike and dissatisfaction had reigned between them when Prance was but an occasional visitor at the house, how much more did it reign now! They did not openly quarrel; they had not done so yet; but an ever-perpetual system of what the other servants called "magging" was kept up

between them. Fierce and fiery was the disposition with which each regarded the other; a passion of resentment, of antipathy—call it what you will—smouldering ever in their hearts.

The foundation for it was laid in their mutual personal dislike, and the charge of the children completed it. Honour naturally wished Benja to be regarded as first and foremost in right of his seniority and position as the heir; Prance held up the infant as the chief, of right; and it need not be said that she was tacitly, if not openly, supported by Mrs. St. John. It was doubly unfortunate; the squabbles of the nurses need not have done harm, but their rivalry in the children enhanced the feeling in their mistress. To do Mrs. Darling justice, she discouraged absolutely any difference being made, even in thought, between the children, if such came under her notice in her temporary visits at the Hall; and once, when she heard a sneer given by Prance to Honour and Benja, she had shut herself up in her room with the woman, and taken her sharply to task.

Well, the time went on to Easter. On the Thursday in Passion week Mr. St. John was expected home; and his wife, who loved him much, anticipated his return in a sort of impas-

sioned eagerness, not the less strong because it was controlled under her usual demeanour, so cold and calm. The pony-carriage was sent to the station in the afternoon to meet the train; and Alnwick's mistress took her place at an open window that overlooked the approach, long and long before the carriage could return.

It was a warm, brilliant day; one of those lovely days that sometimes come in spring, presenting so great a contrast with the past winter, and raising many a heart to Heaven. As she sat there, Benja darted in. The door had not been firmly closed, and the child pushed it open triumphantly and flew to Mrs. St. John, black as any little tinker: hands, face, dress, a sight to be seen. She wore a charming gown of apple-green figured silk, and a coquettish little lace head-dress, fastened on with large gold pins.

"Benja, what have you been doing to yourself?"

Benja laid his little black hands on her gown, and told her a tale not very easy to be understood—his grey eyes laughing, his pretty teeth glistening. Brave had run somewhere, and Benja had run after him, and the two—or perhaps only Benja—had fallen down by the cocks and hens, where it was dirty. And they

had *stayed* down apparently, and rolled about together.

"Then Benja's a naughty boy to get himself in such a state," she cried, having quickly interposed her handkerchief between the bright silk and the dirty hands. "Where's Honour?"

Benja broke into a merry laugh. He had contrived to double upon Honour and evade her, while she was looking for him.

The child kept his place at her knee, and chattered on in his imperfect tongue. Mrs. St. John did not give herself further trouble to understand it; she fell into a reverie, her fingers unconsciously rambling amidst the child's fair curls.

"Oh! so you are here, sir!" exclaimed Honour, looking in. "My goodness! I've been all over the house after you."

"Me wid mamma," chattered Benja.

"And a fine pickle you are in, to be with your mamma, naughty child!"

"You should not let him get into this state, Honour."

"It's not my fault, ma'am; he ran away from me after the dog."

"Take him into the nursery," concluded Mrs.

St. John, turning her eyes to the window again, and to the winding road.

Honour carried him away, talking lovingly to him—that he was a sad little boy to make himself so dirty, and dirty little boys never went to heaven unless they got clean again.

Mrs. Carleton St. John sat on, dreamily watching.

The first thing that aroused her from it—and how long it was afterwards she hardly knew—was the sound of voices outside. She looked out and saw Honour and Benja. Master Benja was dressed in all his best, and looked as if he had just come out of a bandbox. Honour had her things on for walking.

“Where are you going?” inquired Mrs. St. John.

“Me going to see papa,” responded eager Benja, before Honour could speak, his bright eyes and his cheeks in a glow.

“I am taking him to meet the carriage, ma’am,” added the nurse.

“But——” Mrs. St. John was beginning, and then suddenly stopped; and Honour was half-scared at the blank look, the momentary flash of anger that succeeded each other on her face.

"Why should you take him there?" she resumed; "he will see his papa soon enough at home."

"Why should I not take him, ma'am?" rejoined Honour, quite respectfully, but in a bold spirit.

And Mrs. Carleton St. John could not say why; she had no ready plea for the refusal at hand. Honour waited a minute, but no words came.

"It's as well to walk that way as any other, ma'am," she said, taking Benja's hand. "His papa might be disappointed else. When he used to return home last year, and did not meet Master Benja in the avenue, he'd cry out for him before he well got inside the doors."

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. St. John. "Keep in this upper part, within view."

They turned away slowly, Honour secretly rebelling at the mandate; and the mistress of Alnwick looked after them. She had been lost in a reverie, anticipating the moment of her husband's entrance, when, after her first welcome to him was over, she should summon her child and place it lovingly in his arms. It seemed that another child was to be first in those arms; and she had

not bargained for it. One wild, unhealthy longing was ever haunting, half-unconsciously, the mind of Mrs. St. John—that her husband should love *her* child better than that other one.

She ran up-stairs to Prance. She bade Prance hasten to attire the baby, and take him out to meet his papa. The child was asleep. Prance glanced at it as if she would have said so; but her mistress's tone was imperative, evidently admitting neither contradiction nor delay.

"Oh, so *you've* come!" was Honour's salutation, not very graciously expressed, when she found herself joined by Prance. "What's the matter with him?"

The question applied to the crying baby, fractious at being awoke out of its sleep. Prance, who rarely condescended to quarrel in words, went on with her quiet step and supercilious manner, her head in the air.

"I've as much right here as you," she said: "and Master George as the other. Mind your own business, and don't talk to me."

Presently the carriage came in view, Mr. St. John driving. He pulled up when he found himself in the midst of the children, gave the reins to the groom, and leapt out. Little Benja danced

about his papa in an ecstasy of joy, and Mr. St. John clasped him in his arms.

Two minutes at the least elapsed before he remembered Prance, who had stood perfectly still, she and her charge. He turned to the baby to caress it, but his voice and face were strange, and of course it set up a loud cry, the more loud that it had not recovered its temper. Mr. St. John left it and walked across the grass with Benja, his whole attention absorbed in his first-born. The boy was sometimes caught up in his arms for a fresh embrace, sometimes flitting along by his side on the grass, or turned round before him, always hand in hand, the buttons of steel on the green velvet tunic glistening in the sun. He had taken off his cap, throwing it to Honour, and his pretty curls waved away from his brow with every movement, displaying that winning expression of feeling and intelligence of which his features had given promise in his infancy.

Mr. St. John waved his hat to his wife at the open window. She had seen it all; the loving meeting with the one child, the neglect of the other. Passion, anger, jealousy, waged war within her: and she could no more have controlled them



than she could control the wind that was making free with her husband's hair. All she saw, all she felt, was, that he had betrayed his ardent love for Benja, his indifference to *her* child. In that one moment she was as a mad woman.

What exactly occurred upon his entrance, George St. John could not afterwards remember : he was too much scared, too terrified it may be said, to receive or retain any correct impression. A strange, wild look on his wife's face, telling, as it seemed to him, of madness ; a wail of reproaches, such as had never been addressed to him from woman's lips ; Benja struck to the ground, with a violent blow, and his cheek bleeding from it, passed before his eyes as in a troubled vision. It appeared to last but a moment ; but a moment : the next, she had sunk on a sofa ; pale, trembling, hysterical.

George St. John gathered his scattered senses, and picked up the child. He wiped his poor little outraged face with a handkerchief, laid it on his bosom for an instant to soothe him to composure, and carried him into the hall to Honour. The girl shrieked out when she saw the cheek, and looked up at her master with inquiring eyes. But his were averted.

"An accident," he quietly said. "Wash it with a little warm water."

He returned to the room, closing the door on himself and his wife. He did not reproach her by so much as a word: he did not speak to her: he went to the window and stood there in silence, looking out, his back turned to her, and his forehead pressed against one of the panes.

She began to utter reproaches now, sobbing violently; fond reproaches, that all his affection was lavished upon Benja, leaving none for her child. He replied coldly, without turning round, that his affection was as lively for one child as for the other; he was not conscious of any difference, and hoped he never should be: but an infant of five months old, who cried at his approach, could not yet be made the companion to him that Benja was.

"Oh, George, forgive me!" she sobbed, coming close to him, and laying her hand on him caressingly. "I love—I love you; and I could not bear it. He is our child, you know; yours and mine; and it seemed as if he was nothing to you beside Benja. Won't you forgive me?"

He could not resist the pleading words; he

could not throw back the soft hand that was stealing itself into his.

"I forgive it; if you think forgiveness lies with me, Charlotte," he answered, turning round at last, but speaking sadly and quietly.

"You have not kissed me," she whispered, the tears chasing each other down her cheeks.

He bent to kiss her at once: just in the same cold, quiet manner in which he had spoken; as if his mind were abstracted from the present. She felt it bitterly; she blamed her "quick feelings" aloud; and when her tears were dried, she ran up to the nursery in an impulse, seized hold of Benja, and sat down with him upon Honour's rocking-chair.

There she fondled him to her; she pushed his hair from his brow; she laid his hot cheek, clear again under the influence of the warm water, against her own.

"Benja love mamma still?" she murmured softly in his ear. "Mamma did not mean to hurt him."

And the noble little fellow broke into a loving smile in her face, by way of answer, and kissed her many times with his rosy lips.

"Be very gentle with his poor cheek, Honour,"

she said, as she put him down and left the room.

"It is only a little bruised, I see."

"Then it *was* an accident, as master said," decided the wondering Honour. "I declare if I did not think at the time she had done it herself!"

Mr. Carleton St. John had not stirred from his place at the window. He stood there still, looking out, but seeing nothing. The re-entrance of his wife into the room did not arouse him.

"I have been to make my peace with him, George," she said, almost as inaudibly as she had spoken above. "Dear little Benja!—we are better friends than ever, and he has been giving me a hundred kisses of forgiveness. Oh, George, my husband, I am so sorry! Indeed, indeed, I will strive to subdue my fits of passion; I'll not strike him again."

But George Carleton St. John stood as one who understands not. He did not hear: his thoughts were cast back in the past. The injunction—nay, the prayer—of his dying wife was present to him; the very look on her sweet face as she spoke it; the faint tones of her loving voice, soon to be silent for ever.

"When the months and the years go by, and

you think of another wife, oh, choose one that will be a *mother* to my child. Be not allured by beauty, be not tempted by wealth, be not ensnared by specious deceit; but take one who will be to him the loving mother that I would have been."

Bitterly, bitterly, the prayer came back to him. How had he fulfilled it? He glanced around at the wife he had chosen, and could have groaned aloud in the anguish of his remorseful heart.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE ALNWICK SUPERSTITION.

THE time went on at Alnwick Hall just as it goes on everywhere, and the two boys grew with it. It was autumn weather. Benja was a sturdy gentleman of nearly four, strong and independent ; George, a delicate little fellow of nearly two, with fair curls and a bright rose-tint on his cheeks.

Mr. Carleton St. John spent more time in London than was absolutely necessitated by his parliamentary duties, frequently remaining there when the House was not sitting ; and during his sojournings at the Hall, it seemed that he never wanted an excuse for being away from home. Shooting, fishing, coursing, hunting, riding about the land with his steward, superintending improvements ; presiding on the small magisterial bench of Alnwick ; going over to the

county town for more important meetings ; staying a day or two with bachelor neighbours—what with one plea or another, the master of Alnwick Hall was nearly always out. What his wife thought of these frequent absences cannot be told ; a dark cloud often sat upon her brow, but things went on smoothly between them, so far as the servants knew. It was whispered that George St. John had not found in Charlotte Norris the angel he had anticipated ; how many men *have* secured angels in marrying for beauty ?

It was autumn weather, I say—September ; and Mr. St. John was at home. Whether he would have been there had he not been sent for, might be a question ; for he had written word home that he thought of taking a walking-tour in Belgium during the month of October ; but an illness that attacked Mrs. St. John caused him to be summoned to Alnwick.

A serious illness, if not dangerous, and brought on, it was more than hinted to the husband when he arrived, by some unseemly fit of violent temper. Mr. St. John was getting accustomed to hear of these violent fits of temper now ; four or five he had heard of during their married life, but the one described in the last chapter was all

he had himself witnessed. Some temporary hurt to her child, caused by the carelessness of a servant, had this time brought it on; and the immediate result to herself was disastrous. Mr. St. John found Mrs. Darling at the Hall, and Mr. Pym was in frequent attendance; but she was already beginning to get better.

Mr. St. John sat on a bench on the grassy slope before the windows, idly revelling in the calm beauty of the September day. The trees were glowing with the warm tints of autumn; crimson, brown, yellow, purple; and the blue sky, patched here and there with delicate, white fleecy clouds, seemed to rise to a wondrous and beautiful height. The two children attended by their nurses, Prance and Honour, were gambolling in the park in the distance with the favourite dog, Brave: their shouts and Brave's deep bark reaching the ears of Mr. St. John.

He was plunged in thought, as he sat—rather lazy thought. The children before him, the sick wife up-stairs, and the not very comfortable state of affairs altogether, furnishing the chief themes. They had carried him back to his second marriage. Caught by the beauty of Charlotte Norris, he had rushed into the union headlong, giving



himself no time for proper deliberation; no time, in fact, to become well acquainted with her. "Marry in haste, and repent at leisure," he murmured to himself; and just then he became aware of the proximity of Mrs. Darling.

She was coming across the park at a right angle. She had walked to her own house that morning, and was now walking back again, six miles; more, indeed, the field way, which she took that fine day as being pleasantest. She was a great walker, enjoying it thoroughly: and she came up with a merry smile on her bright and still pretty face, as she nodded to her son-in-law.

"How idle you look, Mr. Carleton!" she exclaimed, as he made room for her to sit beside him. She generally called him by that name.

"I have felt idle lately, I think. Did you find all well at home?"

"Quite well. Mary Anne has got the mumps; but she's subject to them. I told her to lie in bed and rub hartshorn on her face. Is Charlotte up?"

"I don't know. I have been sitting here these two hours."

"Mr. Pym said she might get up to-day for a

short while, provided she lay on the sofa. How those little ones are enjoying themselves."

She pointed to the park. Mr. St. John was looking at the children likewise, to all appearance. His right elbow rested on the arm of the bench ; his hand supported his chin, and his eyes gazed out straight before him. In reality he neither saw nor heard ; he was buried just then in the inward life of thought.

"What causes these illnesses of Charlotte?" he suddenly asked, without moving his position. "This is the second time."

If ever there was a startled look on a woman's face, it was on Mrs. Darling's then. "She is delicate, I think," was the answer given, after a pause.

"I think not ; not naturally so," dissented Mr. St. John, with emphasis. "I hear of fits of temper, Mrs. Darling, so violent as to suggest the idea of madness for the time being," he resumed, "That was the source of this illness, I understand. The result was only a natural consequence."

"Who told you that?" eagerly asked Mrs. Darling. "Mr. Pym?"

"No ; Mr. Pym has never spoken a word to me on the subject in his life. I mentioned it to him on the occasion of the other illness, ten

months ago; but he would not understand me—turned it off in an unmistakeably decisive manner.”

Mrs. Darling bit her lips. That she was in some great and annoying perplexity, none could doubt who saw her countenance; but she kept it turned from Mr. Carleton.

“I have witnessed one of these scenes of violence myself,” he resumed. “I declare that I never was so alarmed in my life. I thought Charlotte had suddenly become mad.”

Mrs. Darling's lips grew white. But the revelation—that he had witnessed this—did not come upon her by surprise: for Prance had told her of it at the time.

“If I mention this to you now, Mrs. Darling, it is not done in the light of a complaint. I married your daughter, and I must abide——” he paused here, as if he would have altered or softened the phrase, but went on with it immediately—“by the bargain. She is my wife; my house's mistress; and I have no wish that it should be otherwise: but my object in speaking to you is, to inquire whether you can suggest any means by which these violent attacks of temper can be prevented.”

Still there was no answer. Mrs. Darling looked cold, white, frightened; and she turned her head further away than before.

"You have had a life's experience with her, you must know a great deal more of this failing than I," resumed Mr. St. John. "Has she been subject to it all her life?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Darling, speaking at last. "But not often. I speak the truth in all sincerity, when I say that until she married I cannot remember that she had more than three or four attacks. It is an unhappy failing of temper; I acknowledge it to be so: but it is over in a minute, Mr. Carleton."

"But think of what it is for the minute! She might—she might kill anybody in one. I am sure she had no control whatever over herself the day I saw her."

Mrs. Darling looked distressed. "She is always so sorry for it afterwards, Mr. Carleton," she said in a pleading tone of excuse; "she is repentant as a little child."

He knew that. But after-repentance does not alter present danger.

"You are very sweet-tempered yourself, and perhaps cannot make allowance for those who are

otherwise," observed Mrs. Darling, turning to him with a smile. "If you only knew how many thousands of violent tempers there are in the world! Charlotte's is but one amid the number."

"That is not the question," he hastily replied, alluding to the first portion of her sentence. "I have said that I am not complaining of the fact, and I am vexed at having to speak to you at all; I only wish to know whether there is any preventive."

"I don't know of any," said Mrs. Darling. "It is very stupid of Charlotte, very! One might have thought her last illness would be a warning to her; and now there's this! She will never have another child to live, if this is to go on."

"It is not only the injury she does herself; there's the fear of her doing injury to others. She might, I say, strike a fatal blow: she is mad in these——"

"No, no; not that," interrupted Mrs. Darling. "Pray do not say so, Mr. St. John. She's not mad."

"I am sorry to pain you," said Mr. St. John. "I mean, of course, that while the paroxysm is upon her, she is no more capable of self-control than a woman absolutely mad would be. If there

were any means, any line of conduct we could adopt, likely to act as a preventive, it should be tried. I thought it possible you might have learnt how to check it in the past years."

"I never knew yet that there was any effectual remedy for violent temper. A clergyman will tell you it may be kept in control by prayer; a surgeon, by the help of drugs: but I suppose neither is certain always to answer. I had a servant once, a very good and valuable servant too, who would fly into the most frightful passion once or twice a year, and break the crockery."

Mrs. Darling spoke with a gay laugh, as if she would make light of the whole. It jarred on the good feeling of Mr. St. John, and he knit his brow.

"Then there's nothing at all that you know of to be suggested, Mrs. Darling?"

"I really do not. But I think they will wear out of themselves: as Charlotte gets older, she must get wiser. I will take an opportunity of speaking to her. And she is so sweet-tempered in a general way, Mr. Carleton, though a little haughty in manner perhaps, that these few past lapses may surely be pardoned."

Mr. St. John made no answering remark. He rose and stretched himself, and was moving

away. Mrs. Darling detained him with a question.

"How did you learn that this illness was so brought on? Did Honour tell you?"

"No! I was not aware that Honour knew of it."

"Neither am I aware that she does. I mentioned Honour, because I should suppose her to be more of a confidential servant to you than are the rest, and might acquaint you with what takes place here in your absence."

Mr. St. John brought his clear, truthful eyes to bear stedfastly on those looking at him. He was open, honourable, unsuspicious as the day; but he could not help wondering whether the words concealed any double meaning.

"I have no confidential servant, Mrs. Darling. If I had, I should not allow him, or her, to repeat tales to me of the home of which my wife is mistress. When Honour speaks to me, it is of Benja; and all the world might hear, patience permitting, for I believe she takes him to be a cherub without wings. The one to tell me of it was Charlotte."

*"Charlotte!"*

The surprised echo fell upon empty air. Mr.

St. John had turned off in the direction of the children.

Yes, his informant had been Charlotte. Suspecting something of the sort when summoned from London, he had questioned his wife on his arrival; and she, with many tears and pretty regrets, confessed to him that she had "gone into a passion" with Prance—with Prance, of all others!—and the agitation had made her ill. It was perhaps well for Charlotte that he was so perfectly equable: had she married a man passionate as herself, they might have pulled each other's noses off. Mr. St. John was of calm temperament; Prance was more than calm: so far well, for they had the most to do with Mrs. St. John.

Mr. St. John turned in his walk, hearing himself called, and saw his wife's mother hastening after him.

"Mr. St. John, is it this that has been worrying you in London?"

"Worrying me in London? Nothing has been worrying me in London."

"Has it not? You were looking so ill when you got down here: thin, and worn, and changed. I said nothing, for fear of alarming Charlotte."



"I have not felt well for some little time. But it is really my health that is in fault, Mrs. Darling; not worry."

"You were worn out, perhaps, with the long session: those late hours do fag a man. This country air will restore you."

"I hope so," he replied in a dreamy tone, and his eyes had a far-off, dreamy look in them. "It would not be well yet for yon little fellow to be Alnwick's master."

Mrs. Darling thought nothing of the remark: perhaps George St. John thought as little. It was an indisputable fact that he was looking thin, ill, not so strong as he used to look: but many men, wearied with the late hours, the wear and tear of a London season, look so every autumn, and get robust again by spring.

The fact was, he began to suspect his health was failing. And when a man, neither a coddler nor a hypochondriac, suspects this, rely upon it, it's time he looked into the cause. Mr. St. John was careless of himself, as men mostly are; a year ago he would have laughed outright at the idea of going to a doctor. But the intense feeling of weariness, of almost utter want of strength, which had come upon him in London, coupled with a

rapid wasting away of flesh, and all without any cause, had forced him to wonder what the matter was. He had made an engagement for a walking-tour, but when the time came to start he doubted whether his strength would be equal to it. That somewhat aroused him; not to alarm, more to a curiosity as to what could be amiss: and just upon that, came the summons to Alnwick on account of the serious illness of his wife. Mr. St. John went down at once, and dismissed his own ailments with the thought that quiet and country air would set him to rights again.

For a day or two after his return, he felt refreshed, stronger, better in all ways. But the superficial renovation faded again, and by the time he had been a week at Alnwick he felt weaker than he had felt at all. The day previous to this conversation with Mrs. Darling, he had spoken to Mr. Pym, telling that gentleman he thought he wanted tonics.

"Tonics!" repeated Mr. Pym. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing is the matter with me that I know of. There it is. I've no ailment in the world, and yet I feel so weak and get so thin. It seems a sort of wasting away."

A recollection, sharp as a needle and causing a great deal more pain, darted into Mr. Pym's mind as he looked at him. Others of the St. Johns of Alnwick had wasted away without apparent cause; wasted to death.

"We'll soon get you right again," said he, a shade more of quickness in his speech than usual. "You shall have some tonics."

The tonics came; and Mr. St. John took them. He tried other means; cold bathing, driving out, living almost in the open air; but he did not get stronger.

"Didn't my father waste away like this?" he suddenly said to Mr. Pym, one day.

"Oh, pooh, no!" quite angrily replied the surgeon. "Your father had a peck of troubles upon him—and I'm sure you can't remember anything about him, for you were but five years old when he died."

George St. John laughed. "You need not fear to frighten me, Pym. I think he did waste away; but that's no reason, you know, why I should."

He said nothing to his wife of his feeling of indisposition, or that he was consulting Mr. Pym. This was from no particular wish of suppressing

it; more that he really did not think it of sufficient importance to speak of. But it came to her knowledge incidentally.

She had grown strong again, and was sitting on the slopes one afternoon with her embroidery, quiet, gentle, smiling, as if not a cloud of anger had ever distorted her fair features, when she saw Mr. Pym approach the house and enter. It suddenly occurred to her that she had so seen him once or twice lately, and had wondered, in a passing temporary way, what he wanted. Certainly his visits were not for herself now.

"What can it be that he comes for?" she said aloud, pausing in her work, and looking at the door by which Mr. Pym had disappeared.

If the question was not addressed to air, it must have been meant for Benja, that young gentleman being the only person within sight and hearing. He was sitting astride on the arm of the bench at Mrs. St. John's elbow, absorbed in a new picture-book that Honour had bought him, and teasing Mrs. St. John's patience out with his demands that she should admire its marvels.

"Mr. Pym comes for papa," said quick Benja.

"For papa!" she repeated. "Nonsense,

Benja! Papa's not ill. He's looking very thin, but I am sure he's not ill."

"Mr. Pym comes for him, and he sends him physic," persisted Benja. "For I was in the room yesterday, mamma, and heard them talking."

Mrs. St. John thought this rather strange. Presently she saw Mr. Pym and her husband come out and go strolling down the avenue together for a short way. The latter then turned back.

"Benja, go and tell your papa that I want him."

But Mr. St. John had seen his wife sitting there, and was on his way to her already. He caught up Benja when the boy met him, kissed him fondly, put him down again, and the two came on together, Benja leaping and holding his papa's hand. Mrs. St. John was watching with compressed lips. Even still she could not bear to see the love of her husband for Benja. It was very foolish of her, very wrong, and she knew herself that it was so: but, strive against it as she would, as she *did*, the feeling kept its mastery.

"George, what is the matter with you?" she asked, as her husband sat down beside her, and Benja ran off with his pictures. "Why does Mr. Pym come?"

"I think he comes partly because he likes the walk," was the answer, given with a smile. "I asked him for some tonics during the time he was attending you, and he constituted me a patient directly. It's the way with the doctors."

"Don't you feel well?"

"I don't feel strong. It's nothing, I suppose. You need not look alarmed, Charlotte."

Mrs. St. John was looking more surprised than alarmed. She wondered her husband had concealed it, she said, half reproachfully.

"My dear, there was no concealment in the case. I felt languid, and spoke to Pym: that was all. It was not worth mentioning."

"You have no complaint, George?"

"None whatever, that I am aware of."

"And are in no pain?"

"None."

"Then it can't be anything serious," she said, reassured.

"Of course it can't. Unless anybody chooses to look at it in an ominous light. I accuse Pym of doing so, and he retorts by wanting to know if I think him superstitious. There's an old belief abroad, you must know, Charlotte, that the

St. Johns of Alnwick never live to see their thirty-third birthday."

She looked up at him. He was speaking half jestingly, half seriously ; with a smile, but not a gay one, on his lips.

"But that's not true, George?"

"As true as most such sayings are, invented by old women over their tea-cups. It need not alarm either of us, Charlotte."

"But I mean, it is not true that such a belief is abroad?"

"Oh, *that's* true. Ask Pym. A great many of us have died just about that age ; there's no denying it ; and I presume that has given rise to the popular fancy."

"What have they died of?"

"Some of one thing, some of another. A good proportion of the whole have fallen in battle. My great-grandfather died early, leaving seven little sons. Three of them were taken in childhood ; the other four lived to see thirty, but not one of them thirty-three. I imagine the premature death of so large a number of sons must have imparted the chief impetus to the superstition. Any way, there's no denying the fact that the St. Johns of Alnwick have not been long-lived."

“And the St. Johns of Castle Wafer?”

“It does not apply to them. Why, Isaac St. John is now all but fifty. It is owing to this mortality that Alnwick has been so often held by a minor. The Hall came to me when I was five years old.”

“But, George”—and she spoke hesitatingly and wistfully—“you *don't* think there's anything in it?”

“Of course there's not. Should I be telling this gossip to you, wife, if I did?”

She thought not, either. She glanced at his fresh complexion, so bright and clear; at the rose-red on his cheeks, redolent, apparently, of health; and her mind grew easy, and she laughed with him.

“George! you are now thirty-three!”

“No. I shall be thirty-three next May, if I live till then.”

“If you live till then!” she echoed. “Does that imply a doubt of it in your own mind?”

“Not at all. I daresay I am in no more danger of dying than others—than Mr. Pym—than old Dr. Graves—than any man you like to think of. In one sense we are all in danger of it, danger continually; and, Charlotte, when any circum-



stance brings this fact to our minds—for we forget it too much—I think it should serve to make us very regardful of each other, more cautious to avoid inflicting pain on those we love.”

His words conveyed a tone of pointed meaning. She raised her eyes inquiringly.

“Subdue those fits of temper for my sake, Charlotte,” he whispered, letting his hand fall on hers. “You don’t know how they pain me. I might recall to you their unseemliness, I might urge the sad example they give the children; but I would rather ask it by your love for me. A little effort of will; a little patient self-control, and you would subdue them.”

“I will, George, I will,” she answered, with earnest, willing acquiescence. And there was a look that told of resolution in her strange and dreamy eyes, as they seemed to gaze before her at the imaginary landscape of the future.

All in a moment a sudden thought rose up within her—a conviction, if you will—that this fancy, belief, superstition—call it what you please—of the premature deaths of the masters of Alnwick, must have been the secret and still unexplained cause of her mother’s opposition to the match.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A SHADOW OF THE FUTURE.

OCTOBER came in, and was passing. George St. John sat at his desk, reading over a letter he had just penned, preparatory to folding it. It may facilitate matters if we read it also :

“MY DEAR MR. ST. JOHN,

“‘It behoves all sane men to make a will.’ Do you recognise the sentence? It was from your own lips I heard it spoken, years ago, when I was a little chap in tunics, and somehow it has never gone out of my memory. Then, you will say, why have you, George St. John, lived to your present age and never made one?—and in truth I can only plead carelessness as the excuse. I am about to remedy the omission. Not that

there would be much trouble with my affairs were I to die without leaving a will, as Benja takes nearly all I have; and there's my wife's marriage settlement—you know how poor it is—to claim the rest. On that score, therefore, the obligation is not a very onerous one; and perhaps that fact may have induced the carelessness I admit. But there is another phase of the question that has latterly forced itself on my attention—the necessity of providing proper guardians for my children in the event of my death.

“Will you, Isaac St. John, good and true man that you are, be this guardian? I say, ‘this guardian;’ for though another will be associated with you for form's sake, I shall wish you to be the acting one. The other of whom I have thought is General Carleton, my late wife's uncle; and the General, being a bilious old Indian, will not like to have any active trouble thrust upon him. I hope, however, the charge would not entail trouble upon you, any more than upon him; as my present wife will be constituted the children's personal guardian. Let me have an answer from you at your convenience, but do not refuse my request.

"Give my kind regards to Mrs. St. John. Is Fred with you? What about Lady Anne?"

"Believe me,

"Ever your sincere friend and cousin,

"GEORGE CARLETON ST. JOHN."

The letter was folded, sealed, and addressed to Isaac St. John, Esquire, of Castle Wafer. George St. John laid it aside with others for the post, and then turned to a mass of papers, which he began to sort and look into. Indeed he seemed latterly to have taken quite a mania for arranging his affairs and putting them straight: and his steward said privately to a friend, that Mr. St. John was growing as methodical as he had formerly been indifferent.

While he was thus engaged, his wife came in, Georgy in her arms, whom she was making believe to scold. The two-year-old boy, indulged, wilful, rather passionate, did just as he liked, and he had now chosen to pull his mamma's hair down. He was a loving, charming little fellow; and whatever there was of wilfulness in his conduct, was the fault of his mother's great indulgence.

"Look at this dreadful little boy, papa!" she

exclaimed, standing before her husband, her luxuriant hair, dark and shining as a gipsy's, flowing down on her light muslin dress : " see what he has done to poor mamma ! Don't you think we must sell him to the old cobbler at Alnwick ? "

Mr. St. John looked up from his crowded desk, speaking half crossly. The interruption annoyed him.

" How can you let him so pull you about, Charlotte ? George, you want a whipping. "

She sat down, clasping the boy to her heart in an access of love. " Whipping for Georgy ! " she fondly murmured in the child's ear. " No, no : Georgy pull mamma's hair down if he likes. " But Honour could have told a tale to prove that she was not always so tolerant. Benja had once pulled her hair down in play—it was just after she came to the Hall—and she had left the marks of her fingers on his face for it. It's true she seemed sorry afterwards, and soothed him when he cried : but she did it.

Letting George sit on her knee, she did up her hair as well as she could. George laughed and chattered, and tried to pull it down again ; altogether there was a great noise. Mr. St. John spoke :

"I wish you'd take him away, Charlotte: I am very busy."

"Busy! But I came to talk to you, George," she answered.

"What about?"

"Something that I want to do—something that I have been thinking of. Here, Georgy, amuse yourself with these, and be quiet," she said, taking up a small plate containing a bunch of grapes, which happened to be on the table, and giving it to the restless and romping child: "eat them while I talk to papa."

"Won't another time do, Charlotte?"

"I shall not keep you a minute. Next week November will come in. And the 10th will be—do you remember what the 10th will be?"

"Benja's birthday," said Mr. St. John, speaking without thought, his attention wholly given to the papers before him.

You should have seen the change in her face—it wore an evil look just then.

"And George's also!"

The tone jarred on the ear of Mr. St. John, and he raised his eyes quickly.

"George's also, of course. What of it, Charlotte?"

The angry emotion had raised a storm within her, and her breath was coming in gasps. But she strove for self-control, and pressed her hand on her chest to still it.

"You can think of Benja, you cannot think of Georgy! It is ever so."

"Nay, you are mistaken," said Mr. St. John, warmly. "I think as much of one as I do of the other: I *love* one as much as I do the other. If I answered you shortly, it is because I am busy."

Mrs. St. John was silent for a few moments, apparently playing with the child's pretty curls. When she spoke, all temper appeared to have been subdued, and she was cordial again.

"I want to keep their birthday, George."

"With all my heart."

"But to keep it grandly, I mean: something that will be remembered. We will have an out-door fête——"

"An out-door fête!" was the surprised and involuntary interruption.

"Yes; why not? Similar to the one you gave three years ago. Ah, George! don't you remember it, and what you asked me then? We have never had one since."

"But that was in September; this will be November—too late for that sort of thing."

"Not too late if this fine weather lasts. It is lovely yet."

"The chances are that it will not last."

"It may. At any rate, George, if it does not, we must entertain the crowd in-doors instead of out. But I have set my heart on keeping this day."

"Very well: I have not the least objection."

"And now, George, shall we invite——"

"If you will kindly leave me alone for half an hour, Charlotte, I shall have done what I am about, and will talk it over with you as much as you please," he interrupted. "I expect the steward in every minute, and am not ready for him."

"We'll go then, Georgy, and leave papa alone. Make haste."

The "make haste" applied to the devouring of the grapes, which Master Georgy was already accomplishing with tolerable quickness. Mrs. St. John, her arm round him, held the plate secure on his little knees; the other hand was still wandering amidst his hair. A charming picture! The child's generally bright complexion



looked very bright to-day; the fair skin white as snow, the cheeks a lovely rose colour. It might have been taken for paint; and the thought seemed to strike Mrs. St. John.

"If he could but sell that," she said to her husband, as she pointed to the bloom; "how many women there are who would give a fortune for it!"

"I'd rather see him like Benja, though," was the prompt and prosaic answer. "That rose-red has been found a fatal sign before now in the St. Johns of Alnwick."

"You have it yourself," said Mrs. St. John.

"Something like it, I believe."

"Then, how can you say it is fatal! You—you—don't mean anything, surely, George?"

George St. John laughed out merrily; a reassuring laugh.

"Not as to him, at least, Charlotte. He is a healthy little fellow—as I hope and believe."

Georgy made an end of the grapes, and, by way of *finale*, tossed the plate up. Mrs. St. John caught it, so there was no damage done. Putting him down, he ran up to his papa, eager to see whether there was anything else on the table, either to eat or to play with. His

mamma took his hand, and was rewarded with a cry and a stamp.

"You have been writing to Isaac St. John!" she exclaimed, her eyes falling on the letter that lay there. "Do you correspond with him?"

"Not often."

"Why have you been writing to him now?"

"Only to ask him a question."

"Oh!" she concluded, taking Georgy up by force, who resisted with all his might. "I thought you might have been writing to invite him here, and he would be such a trouble."

"He'd not come, if I did."

"Is he so very unsightly, George?"

"No: not unsightly at all."

"And the other one—Frederick? Is he so very beautiful?"

George St. John burst into another laugh.

"Beautiful! What a term to apply to a man! But I suppose he is what you women would call so. He *is* good-looking: better looking, I think, than anyone I ever saw. There, that's enough, Charlotte. Put off anything else you have to ask me until by and by."

This fête, as projected by Alnwick's mistress, was carried out. It need not have been men-

tioned at all, but for a misfortune that befel Benja while it was being held. The weather, though getting gradually colder, still retained its fineness; and when the day rose, the 10th of November, it proved to be bright and pleasant.

Crowds flocked to Alnwick. As it had been on the 10th of November, during Mr. St. John's widowhood, the *fête of fêtes*, so it was now—a gathering to be remembered in the county. The invitations had gone out far and wide; visitors were staying in the house, as many as it would hold; day-guests came from all parts, near and distant. It was one of those marked days of pleasure that do not ever fade out of the memory.

But the guests, as it drew towards the close of the afternoon, might have searched for their host in vain, had they happened to want him. Mr. St. John was then in his own sitting-room (the one where you last saw him), leaning back in an easy-chair, and looking tired to death. A little thing fatigued him now: for there could be no mistake that the weakness he complained of was growing upon him. He lay back in the chair in that perfectly still attitude indicative of great weariness; listlessly conscious of the noise out-

side, the music, the laughter, the gay and joyous sounds; and amidst them might be caught distinctly the shouts and cries of the two boys, Benja and George, who were busiest of the busy that festal day.

Presently George St. John stretched out his hand, and took a letter from his desk—the answer from Isaac St. John. It had arrived only that morning, and Mr. St. John, engaged with his guests at breakfast, had but glanced at its contents. He opened it now again.

“CASTLE WAVER, *November 9th.*

“MY DEAR GEORGE,

“You will think I have taken a great deal of time in replying to you, but I wished to give the question mature consideration, and could only snatch brief moments between my sufferings, just now very great.

“I accept the charge. Partly because you were always a favourite of mine (as I believe you know), and I don't like to refuse you; partly because I assume that I shall never (speaking in accordance with probability and human foresight) be called upon to exercise my office: for I hope and trust you have no reason to expect I shall.

I had fully made up my mind never to accept another guardianship: not that I had reason to suppose one was likely to be offered me: the bringing-up of Frederick has been a great responsibility for one situated as I am.

"However, as you say in this case there would be no personal guardianship required, I dare say I could manage the money matters, and therefore consent to accept it. Hoping at the same time, and assuming, that I shall never be called upon to fulfil it.

"Why don't you come and see me? I am very lonely: Frederick is only here by fits and starts, once in a summer's day, and gone again; and Mrs. St. John writes me word that she is prevented coming down this autumn. You can go about at will, and why not come? So much can scarcely be said of me. I should like to make the acquaintance of your wife and of my future charges, who, I hope, never will be my charges. You ask about Anne: nothing is decided; and Frederick holds back mysteriously.

"Ever truly yours, dear George;

"ISAAC ST. JOHN."

George St. John folded the letter again, and

sat with it on his knee. He was beginning to think—to think with that unmistakeable conviction that amounts to a prevision—that his cousin *would* be called upon to accept the charge. Perhaps at no very distant period of time. Pym was getting cross and snappish: a sure and certain sign to one who knew him as well as George St. John did, that he deemed him ill: had he been improving, the surgeon would have been gay as a lark. But it needed not Pym or anyone else to confirm the fact of his increasing illness: the signs were within himself.

He was glad that Mr. St. John had accepted the charge: though he had felt nearly sure that he would, for Isaac St. John lived but to do good to others. A man, as personal joint guardian to his children, could not be proposed; if they were left, as it was only right they should be left, under the guardianship of his wife. There had been moments in this last month or two when, remembering those violent fits of passion, a doubt of her perfect fitness for the office would intrude itself upon him; but he felt that he could not ignore her claims; that there was not sufficient pretext for separating the mother from the child.

As he sat, revolving these and many thoughts

in his mind, he became conscious; gradually and imperceptibly as it were, not suddenly; that the sounds outside had changed their character. The gay laughter had turned into a murmur of alarm, the joyous tongues to hushed cries. He held his breath to listen, and in that moment a wild burst of terror, a concert of shrieks, rent the air. With one bound, as it almost seemed, Mr. St. John was out and amidst them.

The crowd was gathering round the lake, and his heart flew to his children: it was only natural it should. But he caught sight of his wife standing against a tree, holding George to her side with one hand, pressing his face into the folds of her beautiful dress, as if she would keep him from the sight of whatever calamity might be abroad. That she was agitated with some internal emotion, there could be no doubt: her breath was laboured, her face white as death.

"What is the matter? What has happened?" cried Mr. St. John, halting for a moment his fleet footsteps.

"They say—that—Benja's—drowned," she answered, hesitating between every word.

He did not wait to hear the conclusion: he bounded on to the brink of the lake, throwing off

his coat as he ran, ready to plunge in after his beloved child. But one had been before him. The cries had changed into hushed suspense, and now into shouts of admiration: and the first object Mr. Carleton saw as the crowd parted for him, was the dog Brave, swimming to shore with Benja.

“Good dog! Brave! Brave! Come on, then, Brave! Good old dog! Save your playfellow! Save the heir of Alnwick!”

All safe. Only on the bank did the good dog loose the clothes from between his firm teeth, and let Benja slip down. Mr. St. John, more emotion on his face than had been seen there since the death of that child's mother, caught the boy with one hand and caressed Brave with the other.

His wife had not stirred. She stood there, calm, still, as one stunned. Was she frightened? those who had leisure to glance at her asked it? Had her love for her step-son, her dread at losing him, transformed her into a statue?

It was not that she was so much frightened; it was not that she loved Benja. Perhaps she was as yet unconscious of what feelings the moment had served to arouse; partially unconscious that the thought which had blanched her face with



emotion and wildly stirred the pulses of her beating heart, was one fraught with danger: if Benja were drowned, her child was the heir.

Voices were calling out that the boy was dead, and Mrs. St. John lifted her face, a sort of haggard, yearning look upon it. But Mr. Carleton, the boy pressed in his warm arms, knew that he was only insensible. He was hastening away to the house, Honour, half frightened to death, at his side, and eager sympathisers following in his wake, when he bethought him of his wife.

"Honour, just run and tell your mistress that he'll be all right soon. She's there; under the elm-trees."

"Is he dead?" she asked ere Honour could speak, as the girl went up.

"Oh, no, madam, he's not dead, thank Heaven! My master has sent me to tell you that he is all right."

Mrs. St. John did not appear to understand. It seemed to Honour—and the girl was a quick observer—as if her mistress had been so fully persuaded he was dead that her senses were at first closed to the contrary impression, and could not admit it.

"Not dead?" she repeated, mechanically.

"He is not dead," said Honour. "He is in no danger of dying now."

For one single moment—for one moment only—a wild sort of evil glare, of angry disappointment, shot from the eyes of Mrs. St. John. Honour drew back scared, shocked: it had betrayed to the attendant more than she ought to know.

But do not set down Charlotte St. John as a wicked woman. She was not wicked yet. The feeling—whatever its precise nature—had arisen unbidden: she could not help it; and when she became alive to it, she shuddered at it just as truly as Honour could have done. But she did not detect its danger.

The party dispersed. And Mrs. St. John, in a soft muslin wrapper, was watching by the cradle of Benja, who was in a sweet sleep now. She had kissed him and cried over him when they first met; and George St. John's heart had throbbed with pleasure at these tokens of her affection for the child. Benja had slipped into the lake himself, and for two or three minutes was not observed; otherwise there had been no danger.

The danger, however, was over now, and Mr. Pym had gone home, loudly promising Benja a

hatful of physic as a punishment for his carelessness. Mrs. St. John and the household went to rest at midnight, leaving Honour sitting up with the boy. There was not the least necessity for her to sit up, but she would not hear of his not being watched till morning. The child, in fact, was her idol.

Presently Mr. St. John came in, and Honour started and rose. She had been half asleep in her chair, and she had thought her master had gone to bed.

He lay with his little face, unusually flushed, on the pillow, his silken hair rather wild, and one arm outside on the clothes; a charming picture, as most children make when asleep. Mr. St. John bent over the boy on the other side the crib, apparently listening to his breathing; but Honour thought her master was praying, for his eyes were closed, and she saw his lips move.

"We should not have liked to lose him, Honour," he observed with a smile, when he looked up.

"To lose him! Oh, sir! I'd rather have died myself."

"It might have been a care less for me to leave,

though!" he resumed in an abstracted tone. "His mother gone, and I gone: the world might be a cold one for Benja."

"But you are not—you are not fearing for yourself, sir!" exclaimed Honour, quite forgetting, in the shock the words gave her, that it was no business of hers to answer the thoughts of her master.

"I don't know, Honour. I have fancied of late that I may not be here very long."

"Heaven grant you may be mistaken, sir!" was the impulsive aspiration of the girl: "for this child's sake!"

Her master looked at her, struck with the tone of terror, as much as with the words. "Why for his sake?"

Honour was silent.

"Should anything happen to me, Honour, you must all take the greater care of him. Your mistress; you; all of you."

A powerful impulse came over Honour to speak out somewhat of her thoughts; one of those strange impulses that bear the will with them as a torrent impossible to be controlled.

"Sir, for the love of mercy—and may God forgive me for saying it, and may you forgive me!

—if you fear that you will be taken from us, *don't* leave this child in the power of Mrs. St. John !”

“Honour !”

“I know ; I know, sir, I am forgetting myself ; that I'm saying what I have no right to say ; but the child is dearer to me than any living thing, and I hope you'll overlook my presumption for his sake. Leave him in the power of anybody else in the world, but don't leave him in Mrs. St. John's.”

“Mrs. St. John is fond of him.”

“No, sir, she is the contrary. She tries to like him, but she can't. And if you were gone, there'd be no longer a motive—as I believe—for her seeming. I think—I think”—and Honour lowered her voice in beseeching deprecation —“that she might become cruel to him in time.”

Bold words. George St. John did not check them, as perhaps he ought to have done ; rather, he seemed to take them to him and ponder on their meaning.

“To any one else in the world, sir !” she resumed, the tears forcing themselves down her cheeks in her earnestness. “To any of your

own family—to Mrs. Darling—to whom you will ; but do not, do not leave him in the power of his step-mother ! ”

What instinct of prevision caused Honour Tritton thus to speak ? And what made Mr. St. John quit the room without a shade of reproof, as if he silently bowed to it ?

## CHAPTER VIII.

### GRADUALLY WASTING.

BUT though the words of Honour certainly aroused Mr. St. John to think of precaution, they did not arouse him to act upon it. A vein of doubt lay almost in his mind whether his wife did, or *could*, like Benja : it was based upon her unmistakeably jealous disposition, and on the blow she had once given Benja when she was as a mad woman : but with her daily conduct before him, her love displayed as much for Benja as for her own child, he could but believe the boy was safe in her kindness. Certainly the words of Honour recalled those unpleasant doubts forcibly before him ; but he suffered the impression to wear away again. We all know how time, even if you count it but by days or hours, softens the aspect of things ; and before November was out, the master of Alnwick had made his will, leaving

both the children under the personal guardianship of his wife.

And the winter went on, and George St. John grew weaker and weaker. Not very perceptibly so to the eyes about him; the decay was too gentle for that. In February, instead of going up to London when Parliament met, he resigned his seat, and then people grew alive to the change in him, and wondered what ailed Mr. Carleton St. John. Mr. Pym came up perpetually, and was testy enough to raise the roof of the house; he sent drugs; he brought other doctors with him; he met a great physician from the metropolis; but the more he did, the worse seemed to be the effect.

"You'd better give me up for a bad job, Pym, and leave off worrying yourself," Mr. St. John said to him one day as they were strolling down the park together—for Mr. St. John liked to go out with the doctor when he had paid his visits.

"I do you no credit."

"It's because you *won't* do it," gruffly retorted the surgeon. "I order you to a warm climate, and you won't go."

"No; I won't. I am best here. Send me away to those hot places, and I should only die



the sooner. Pym, dear old fellow"—and Mr. St. John put his hand into the surgeon's—"you are feeling this for me more than I feel it for myself. I have settled my business affairs; I have settled—I humbly hope—other affairs of greater moment; and I can wait my summons tranquilly."

"Have you made your will?" asked Mr. Pym, after a pause, which seemed to be chiefly occupied in clearing his throat.

"No end of weeks ago. The chief thing I had to settle was the guardianship of the children. Of Benja, I may say. George would have naturally fallen to his mother without a will."

"And you have left him—Benja——?"

"To my wife, just as I have the other. Mr. St. John, of Castle Wafer, and General Carleton, are the trustees. I thought of my wife's half-brother, Captain Darling, as one of them; but his regiment will probably be ordered abroad, and he may be away for years."

They walked on a few steps further in silence, to the spot that Mr. St. John called his turning place, for it was there he generally quitted the surgeon. As they were shaking hands, Mr. Pym retained his patient's fingers in his, and spoke.

"Will you forgive an old man for his advice? He is double your age, and has had twenty times the experience. For the acquiring good practical lessons of life, commend me to a doctor."

"I'll take it," said Mr. St. John, "in anything except the quitting Alnwick."

"Don't leave Benja under your wife's charge."

"Why not?" came the answering question, after a pause of surprise.

"I have my reasons. For one thing, she is not very strong, and the charge of the two children, with you gone, might be found a heavy task."

"I think that's nonsense, Pym," quietly replied Mr. St. John. "She has plenty of servants, and at a proper age Benja will go out to school. George also. You must have some other reason."

"True. But I am not sure that you would like me to mention it."

"Mention what you will, Pym. Say anything."

"Has it occurred to you that it is within the range of possibility your wife may marry again?"

"My widow may. Yes."

"Then, should this prove the case, and she get new ties about her, Benja might find himself

neglected. George is her own child, secure in her love, whatever betide; Benja is different. Have you provided in any way for the contingency I have mentioned?"

"No. I have left my wife the personal and resident guardian at Alnwick until Benja shall be twenty-one. At that period she must leave it, or only remain there as Benja's guest. It is right, I believe, that it should be so. And I have a precedent in my father's will."

"But his widow was your own mother."

Mr. St. John made no immediate reply. The distinction had probably not occurred to him.

"Take my advice, George St. John," said the surgeon impressively; "do not leave Benja under the charge of your wife. I had rather not discuss with you the why and the wherefore—the pros and cons; but rely upon it some other plan will be better both for the boy and for Mrs. St. John."

He went away as he spoke, and George St. John turned slowly back to the Hall. The conversation recalled the nearly-forgotten words of Honour to his mind with vivid force; and an uncomfortable feeling of indecision crept into it.

Still he did not see any feasible way of altering the arrangements he had made. When he died,

Alnwick Hall would be Benja's, and must be the boy's chief home during his minority: he could not put his wife out of it, and he could not put any one else in it as Benja's personal guardian. He had no means of providing a suitable residence for his widow if she went out of the Hall: in fact, it was only as the heir's guardian that he could at all adequately provide for her. Neither, it must be confessed, did Mr. St. John himself see any great necessity for separating them: but he was a man amenable to counsel, open to listen to advice, and the opinion of two friends (surely both may be called so!) so attached as Mr. Pym and Honour, bore weight with him. It had not been George St. John had he ignored it.

"May God help me to do right!" he murmured, as he entered the house.

He dwelt much upon it during the remainder of the day; he lay awake part of the night: and only when he came to a decision did he get to sleep. Early the next morning he rang for his servant; and at eight o'clock the pony carriage conveyed him to the railway station at Alnwick to take the train. As the market people looked at him, passing them betimes in the fresh February morning, at the bright colour in his face, the

wavy brown hair stirring in the gentle breeze, they said to themselves, how well Mr. Carleton St. John was looking, but thin.

He was going over to Castle Wafer. An hour and a-quarter's journey brought him to a certain town; there he waited twenty minutes, and took another train. Another hour and a-quarter, rather more, of very quick travelling, for this last was express, conveyed him to Lexington, and thence he took a fly to Castle Wafer.

It was one of the most charming houses ever seen. A large, handsome white villa, elaborate in ornament, nestled amidst its lovely grounds, its rising trees of many species. It was a modern house, built by its present owner, Isaac St. John, who had a rare taste for the beautiful, and who had made it exquisite. That house was his hobby in life; his care was his half-brother, Frederick St. John. The estate of Castle Wafer was the entailed inheritance of these St. Johns; and Frederick was the presumptive heir: the undoubted heir, said the world; for it was quite beyond the range of probability that its present possessor would ever marry.

They were the second cousins of the St. Johns of Alnwick, and were the next in succession. Of

great independent wealth themselves, far more so than was George St. John, and of more account in the world, they were yet below him in succession to what might be called the old original family property. That was not Alnwick. An old baronet of eighty-one, Sir Thomas St. John, held it; he was childless, and therefore it would come at his death to George St. John, and to George St. John's sons after him. Had he, George St. John, likewise been childless, the whole, including the title, including Alnwick, would lapse to Isaac St. John.

George St. John had nearly a two-mile drive. He noted the familiar points in the road, and in the fine distant landscape, as they stood out in the clear but not very bright February day: the sprinkling of cottages near Castle Wafer; the one public-house, called the Barley Mow, with its swinging sign-board; and the old-fashioned, substantial, handsome red-brick house, Lexington Rectory, which the wiseacres of other days had built nearly two miles from its church and Lexington proper. It abutted right upon the grounds of Castle Wafer; was the only house of social standing very near to it; and as George St. John glanced at its windows as he passed, he remem-

bered that its present possessor had received his title to orders from a church in the neighbourhood of Alnwick, of which his father was the patron; but he had been a very very little boy then. The house looked empty now; its windows were nearly all closed: and he supposed its incumbent, Dr. Beaucherc, Rector of Lexington and Dean of Westbury, was away at his deanery.

"Mr. St. John is at home?" he asked, as the woman came out to throw back the lodge gates.

"Oh yes, sir." And indeed George St. John had little need to ask, for Mr. St. John rarely, very rarely, was away from Castle Wafer.

A few minutes of turning and winding, and then the front of the house burst upon George St. John's view, and he was close upon it. The sun broke out at the moment, and he thought he had never seen any place so beautiful before; he always did think so, whenever he thus came upon Castle Wafer. The glistening white front, long rather than high, with its elaboration of ornament; the green terraces, covered with their parterres of flowers, in bloom already, and stretching beyond to the less open grounds; the low French windows, open to catch the breeze—never did any dwelling impart so cheerful, so attractive a look as did Castle

Wafer. To a stranger, having no idea of the sort of house he was going to see, perhaps surprise was the first feeling; for the place was as unlike a castle as any place could be. Isaac St. John said laughingly sometimes that he ought to change its appellation. There might have been a castle on the lands in the old feudal ages, but no trace remained of it: and the house, which had been pulled down to give place to this fairy edifice, looked like a twin-fellow to the rectory—red and gaunt and gloomy.

As the hall door was thrown open, and the bright phalanx of colours—pink, yellow, violet—fell on its mosaic pavement from the stained-glass windows, gladdening the eye of George St. John, a tall portly man, rather solemn and very respectable, not to say gentlemanly, was crossing it, and turned his head to see who might be the visitor. Mr. St. John stepped at once past the footman and greeted him. It was Mr. Brumm, Castle Wafer's chief and most respected servant; the many years' personal attendant, and in some respects a confidential one of its master. George St. John held out his hand, as affable gentlemen will do by these valued servants, after years of absence.



"How are you, Brumm? I see I have taken you by surprise."

"You have indeed, sir," said Mr. Brumm, in the slow manner natural to him. "Not more so I am sure, sir, than you will take my master. It was only this morning that he was mentioning your name."

"How is he now?"

"Better, sir, than he has been. But he has suffered very much of late."

Mr. Brumm was leading the way into an inner hall, one light and beautiful as the first, with the same soft colours pervading it from the several windows aloft. Opening a door here, he looked in and spoke:

"A visitor for you, sir—Mr. Carleton St. John."

By the bright fire in this light and charming room—and if you object to the reiteration of the term, I can only plead in excuse that everything was charming at Castle Wafer—with its few fine paintings, its glittering mirrors, its luxuriant chairs and sofas, its scattered books, and its fine harmonium, sat a gentleman, deformed. Not with any hideous phase of deformity that repels the alarmed eye, but simply with a hump upon his back: a small hump, the result of an accident

in infancy. He had a pale, wan face, with the sharp chin usually accompanying these cases ; a face that insensibly attracted you by its look of suffering, and the thoughtful earnestness of its bright, clear, well-opened hazel eyes. Nearly of the middle height, that hump was the only unsightly point in him ; but he was a man of suffering, ailing much ; and he lived chiefly alone, he and his pain. His hair was dark, silken, rather scanty ; but not a thread of silver could be seen in it, though he was close on his fiftieth year.

Laying down the book he was reading, Isaac St. John rose at the mention of the name ; and stepped forward in the quiet undemonstrative way characteristic of him, a glad smile lighting his face.

“ George ! how pleased I am to see you ! So you have thought of me at last ? ”

“ I was half ashamed to come, Mr. St. John, remembering that it is five years since I came before. But I have met Mrs. St. John repeatedly in London, and sometimes Frederick ; so that I have, as it were, seen you at second hand. I have not been well, too.”

Suitable, perhaps, in the distinction of their

ages, it might be observed that while the elder man called the other "George," he was addressed as "Mr. St. John." But Mr. St. John had been nearly a grown-up man when George was a baby, and could remember having nursed him.

"You do not look well, George," he said, scanning the almost transparent face before him.

"And—are you taller? You look so."

"That's because I am thinner. See!"—opening his coat—"I'm only a skeleton."

"What is amiss?"

"I can't tell you. I get thinner and thinner and weaker and weaker, and that's about all I know. I may pick up as the spring comes on, and get right again; but—it may be the other way."

Isaac St. John did not answer. An unpleasant reminiscence of how this young man's father had wasted away eight and twenty years before, kept him silent.

"What will you take, George? Have you come to stay with me?"

"I have come to stay with you two hours: I must be home by nightfall if I can. And I'll not take anything until my business with you is over, for I confess it is my own selfish affairs that

have brought me here. Let me speak to you first."

"As you will. I am ready."

"Ever ready, ever willing to help us all!" returned George St. John, warm gratitude in his tone, "It is about the guardianship that I wish to speak. I thank you for accepting it."

Isaac smiled. "I did not see that I could do otherwise for you."

"Say for my children. Well, listen to me. I have left my wife the personal guardian of my children: she will reside at the Hall until Benja is of age, and they with her, subject of course to their school and college intervals. This is absolute with regard to the youngest, but in regard to the eldest I wish it to be dependent upon your discretion."

"Upon my discretion?"

George St. John had his hands upon his knees, leaning forward in his great earnestness; he did not appear to notice the interruption.

"I wish you (when I shall be gone, and the boys have only their mother) to take means of ascertaining from time to time that Benja is *happy* under his step-mother's care, and that she is doing her part by him in kindness. Should

you find occasion to doubt this, or to think from any other cause that he would be better elsewhere, remove him from her, and place him with anyone you may deem suitable. I dare not say keep him yourself: children are noisy, and your health is imperfect; but place him where you can trust that he will be well done by. Will you undertake this, Mr. St. John?"

"Why do you ask this?" was the reply of Isaac St. John. "Is it a new thought—a sudden thought?"

"It is a new thought, imparted to me chiefly through a conversation I had yesterday with Pym, our surgeon and old friend. He does not think it well that Benja should be left under the absolute control of Mrs. St. John, not being her own child. He said, for one thing, that she might marry again, and Benja would be as it were isolated amidst new ties; but when I pressed him for other reasons—for I am sure he had others—he would not give them; would prefer not to discuss it, he said. He was—I could see that—for having the boy entirely away from her, but that is not to be thought of. I reflected a good deal on what he said, and have come to the conclusion that it may be as well

there should be some such clause inserted in the will as to take from her absolute power, and hence I come to you."

"Your wife is kind to the boy?" asked Mr. St. John. "Pardon me the question, George."

"Very much so. When George was born, she showed some jealousy of the eldest boy, but all that has passed. Benja was nearly drowned last November, and she was quite hysterical afterwards, crying and sobbing over him like a child. The nurse, a most faithful woman, thinks, I know, with Pym, but that's nothing."

"You wish me, in the event of the children being left fatherless, to ascertain whether the elder is well done by at the Hall, and is happy there. If not, I am to remove him? This is what you ask, as I understand it?"

"Precisely so. Should you in your judgment deem that Benja would be better elsewhere, take him away. I shall endow you with full power."

"But how am I to ascertain that?"

"In any way you please. Use any means that may suggest themselves. Go over and see for yourself, or send some suitable substitute, or question Honour—"

"Who is Honour?"

"Benja's nurse. She took to him when my poor Caroline died. My present wife does not seem strong, at least she has had one or two serious illnesses lately, and Pym says the care of the two boys is more than I ought to put upon her. Perhaps it would be."

"Why not at once leave Benja under another guardianship?"

"I should not like to do it. The world would regard it as a slight, an expressed want of confidence in my wife: and besides, in that case I should be divided as to whether to leave the Hall as a present residence to her or to Benja. I—mark me, Mr. St. John—I place full reliance upon my wife; I believe she will do her part by Benja, and make him happy; and in that case there's no harm done. I am only providing for a contingency."

"I see. Well, I accept the charge, George, though it might be well that you should entrust it to a more active man."

"No, no; you, and you only."

They continued to talk together for the brief space of time George St. John had allotted for his stay. Little more was said on the one subject, for George quitted it somewhat pertinaciously,

and they had other topics in common, family matters, news on either side, as is the case when relatives meet after a prolonged separation. At the appointed time he was driven back to Lexington in Mr. St. John's carriage, took the return train, and reached Alnwick about six in the evening.

His wife had sent the close carriage for him, fearing the night air. George St. John directed the coachman to drive round by Mr. Drake the lawyer's; and when that gentleman came out to him he asked him to step up to the Hall on the morrow, on a little matter of business relative to an alteration in his recently-made will.

But Mr. St. John of Castle Wafer, pondering on these matters after his relative's departure, remained puzzled in his own mind, and could by no means arrive at a satisfactory conclusion as to whether there was a danger that Mrs. Carleton St. John might be cruel to Benja, after the fashion of the vindictive uncle of the "babes in the wood," or whether it was feared she would kill him with kindness.



## CHAPTER IX.

### CHANGES AT ALNWICK.

ON a charming summer day in that favourite room whose windows overlooked the broad lands of Alnwick, sat Mrs. Carleton St. John in widow's weeds. Opposite to her, in mourning also, her travelling shawl unpinned and slipping off her slim, falling shoulders, her bonnet dusty, was Mrs. Darling, not five minutes arrived.

Changes had come to Alnwick, as these signs betrayed: its master, so much loved and respected during life, was no more. In the month of May the deceitful, as poets have it, the crisis came for George Carleton St. John, and the Hall passed to another owner—the little boy too young to be conscious of his full loss, and whose chiefest idea connected with it was the black attire with which officious attendants hastened to invest him.

The death at the last was sudden, and Mrs.

St. John was alone when it came. Her mother, Mrs. Darling, had gone abroad, and beyond a very brief note, just telling her of the event, Mrs. Darling received no direct news from her. She wrote letter after letter, for it was not convenient to her to return home immediately; but all the replies—when she got any—came from Prance. And Prance, who was in a degree in the confidence of Mrs. Darling, ventured to intimate that her mistress was “sulky,” and much annoyed with the will.

The last item of intelligence stirred all the curiosity possessed by Mrs. Darling: it also troubled her. She was aware that George St. John had little actual property to bequeath to his wife—and George St. John’s own private opinion had been that Mrs. Darling’s opposition to his marriage with her daughter arose from that sole fact—but there were ways and means of remedying this; and now Mrs. Darling supposed they had not been taken. As soon as she was able, after June came in, she made arrangements for returning to England, and hastened down to Alnwick Hall.

But for the escutcheon displayed on the outer walls, and the badge of widowhood worn by her

daughter, Mrs. Darling might have thought things were as they used to be—that there had occurred no change. The windows were open, the sun was shining, the park was green and flourishing: even Charlotte was not changed. And Mrs. Darling scanned her with a critical eye.

“My dear, you are looking better than I hoped for.”

“I am pretty well, mamma. I wish Prance would come in with Georgy!” she continued in a fretful tone; “I want you to see him, he is so grown!”

“Dear little fellow! I was so sorry that I could not come over at the time, Charlotte, but——”

“It did not matter,” interrupted Mrs. St. John, speaking quickly. “Indeed I think I was best alone: you know, mamma”—turning her deep eyes full upon her mother—“I was always given to be independent. How is Rose?”

“Oh, dear!” returned Mrs. Darling, with a groan, as if recalled to some very annoying subject. “Don’t talk of Rose.”

A half smile crossed the young widow’s lips. “Has she been doing anything dreadful?”

"No : but she is so rebellious."

"Rebellious ! "

"At being kept at school. Mary Anne and Margaret fully expected she would break bounds and conceal herself on board the boat. We had sighted Folkestone before they felt any sort of assurance that she was not there."

"Did Mary Anne and Margaret come over with you?"

"Yes, I left them in London. Frank is expected."

"I think Frank might come down to see me ! " said Mrs. St. John, haughtily.

"My dear, I am sure he will. But he cannot get leave always when he would."

There was a pause. Charlotte, cool, haughty, reserved, as she had ever been, even to her mother, turned to the window again, looking out for her little son. Mrs. Darling was burning to ask various particulars of things she wanted to know, but did not just now see an opening ; and to rush on the questions in this, the first moment of arrival, would be unseemly. She rose from her chair.

"I think I'll go and put myself a little to rights, Charlotte. I am as dusty as I can be."

"Do so, mamma. Your old room. Prance will not be long."

Prance was entering the house then: she had brought Georgy in the back way. There was a loud meeting; Mrs. St. John coming out to share in it. Georgy chattered, and shook his fair curls from his rose-red cheeks, and was altogether lovely. Mrs. Darling did not wonder at the faint cry of pain—that intense love, whose expression amounts to pain—with which his mother caught him to her heart.

"Where is Benja?" asked Mrs. Darling of Prance.

Oh, Master Benja would be coming in sometime, Prance supposed. Honour had begun with her insolence, as usual, so they parted company. And Mrs. Darling, barely giving time for the words to be concluded, made her way hastily towards the staircase, as if she would ignore them.

"Attend mamma, Prance," said the mistress of Alnwick. "She has brought no maid."

Mrs. Darling was exceedingly glad to be attended — by Prance; for it gave her the opportunity to ask explanations, that otherwise she might have had to wait hours for. Scarcely giving the woman time to close the chamber-door

upon them, she began to question her eagerly. Remember that Prance was, so far as Mrs. Darling was concerned, a confidential servant.

"Prance, I was so much troubled by a hint in one of your letters. Is your mistress left badly off, do you know? Will she have to leave the Hall?"

"Oh no, ma'am, she remains in the Hall," was the maid's answer. "She is to live here as Master St. John's guardian, with four thousand a year."

"Four thousand a year!" The magnitude of the sum, far greater than anything she had ever expected, struck most agreeably on the senses of Mrs. Darling. But the next moment arose the thought—how came Prance, an ordinary servant at the Hall, confidential only to herself, to be so wise? "Do you know this for a fact, Prance?" she asked.

"I heard the will, ma'am. Every servant in the Hall was ordered in to hear it read."

"But that is very unusual!" remarked Mrs. Darling. "Was it—was it by your mistress's wish that this was done?" she wonderingly continued.

"I don't think so," answered Prance. "Old Drake the lawyer came to us after they returned from the funeral, and said we were wanted in the large drawing-room. Mrs. St. John was there in her new mourning and her widow's cap; and she

looked very cross and haughty at us as we filed in. The gentlemen who had gone to the funeral were there, and Dr. Graves, and Mr. Pym; I had got the little one, and Honour came in with Master St. John——”

“Why do you call him Master St. John?—he was always called Master Benja,” Mrs. Darling broke in to say.

“He has been called so since that same time, ma’am,” was the woman’s answer. “A gruff old gentleman who was one of the mourners, upright and stiff as a backboard and yellow as gold—it was General Carleton, I believe—heard some one of us call the boy Master Benja, and he spoke up very severely, saying he was not Master Benja, he was Master St. John, and must be nothing else to us until he should be Sir Benjamin. The servants were quite taken to, and have called him Master St. John ever since.”

“Well, go on.”

“We found we were called in to hear the will read. I did not understand it altogether; but I am quite certain that Mrs. St. John is to reside at the Hall and be paid four thousand a year as the heir’s guardian. There was something I was

unable to catch, through Master Georgy's being troublesome at the moment, about the four thousand being reduced to two if Master St. John went away. And, on the other hand, it is to be increased by two, whenever he comes into the title and the other estates. Which will make six thousand a year."

"Then what did you mean, Prance, by sending me word that your mistress was annoyed at the terms of the will? Four thousand a year now, and six in prospective! she cannot find fault with that. It is munificent."

"You may depend upon it, ma'am, that she is so," was the unhesitating reply of Prance. "She is very much annoyed at it, and she has shown it in her manner. That same day after we were dismissed, I had got Master Georgy just outside on the slopes, for the child was fractious and troublesome, I didn't know why, and Dr. Graves and Mr. Pym passed, going to walk home together. I distinctly heard them say to each other how vexed Mrs. St. John was at 'that clause' in the will——"

"What clause?"

"Ah, that I don't know. Dr. Graves said she seemed to take it as implying a want of confidence



in her; and he went on to speak of Mr. St. John of Castle Wafer, as connected with it: but they were getting beyond hearing then."

Mrs. Darling could not solve the question. The more she thought of it, the larger the sum grew in her eyes: it seemed next to impossible that Charlotte could be dissatisfied; and she concluded that Prance, usually so acute, was mistaken.

"And now, Prance," she said, when numberless other questions had been asked and answered, "I must say something to yourself. By your own remarks, I find that there's this same ill-feeling still subsisting between you and Honour! How often have I warned you not to indulge in it!"

"It's Honour's fault," promptly answered Prance.

"It is the fault of both of you," returned Mrs. Darling; "of the one as much as of the other. It is a strange thing you cannot be at peace! You will arouse a jealousy between the two children next, as sure as you are alive."

"It never comes to open quarrelling between us," rejoined Prance. "I don't let it do that: but she's uncommonly aggravating. Especially

now she thinks she's fixed at the Hall, come what will."

"What do you mean?"

"When Mr. Carleton St. John was dying, he told my mistress that he should wish Honour to remain with Benja so long as he required a woman attendant, and Mrs. St. John promised not to remove her from him, unless for any very great cause."

"Quite right. And, Prance, I desire once for all that there may be more pleasantness between you. It is a scandal that the two upper maids of the Hall should be ever at loggerheads; and it's a thoroughly bad example for the children; and it's—you *know* it's not well for your mistress. How was your mistress during Mr. St. John's illness? Resigned?—quiet?"

"Oh, ma'am, she was as a very angel."

"Very well. Don't let me hear of these disputes again, Prance. Your place here is to keep things as quiet as you can: Mrs. St. John wants peace, not——"

Prance uttered an exclamation: it caused Mrs. Darling, who was looking into a bandbox at the time, to turn sharply round. Mrs. St. John was

standing there, behind the bed-curtains—to the startled lady's intense dismay. How much had she heard?

"Charlotte, my dear, I did not know you were there. I was just giving Prance a lecture upon this snappishness that seems always to be going on between her and Honour. Have you come to stay with me, child, while I unpack?" added Mrs. Darling, seeing that her daughter had come forward and was seating herself comfortably in an easy-chair. "Then, Prance, I think you may go now."

"Yes," said Mrs. St. John; "Master George is in the nursery, Prance, and wants you."

And while she so spoke, Mrs. Darling was tormenting herself, as much as one of her easy disposition can do it, as to whether she *had* caught up a word of her conversation with Prance—that part of it relating to the money. There had been some noise in the room from the opening of drawers and pulling about of boxes, which must have prevented their hearing her come in. "I'll speak of it," thought Mrs. Darling: "it's better to take the bull by the horns and make the best of it, when one does get into these dilemmas."

She stole a glance at her daughter, while

busily intent to all appearance in straightening the trimmings of a bonnet she had just pulled out of the bandbox. Mrs. St. John looked cold and stern. *Had* she heard?

"Charlotte, my dear, I am so very anxious about you, as to how things are left, and all that. I dropped a remark to poor Prance, but she seems to think it is all right, that you are left well off and remain here. These simple servants can't know much, of course. I am glad your husband made a proper will."

"He made an infamous one," cried the young widow, her cheek in a glow.

The words completely took Mrs. Darling aback, and she forgot to enlarge on the opinion she had just expressed of poor, simple Prance's imperfect knowledge. "An infamous will, Charlotte!" she exclaimed, "when you have the Hall and four thousand a-year."

"It *is* infamous. I am left dependent upon the heir."

"The heir! Do you mean Benja?"

"There's no other heir but he. Why did George leave me dependent upon him?"

"I don't quite understand you, my dear. In what way are you dependent upon Benja?"

.

"The four thousand a-year are paid to me as his guardian only,—as his guardian and Georgy's. I only stay at the Hall as Benja's guardian. It's all on sufferance."

"But, my dear, your husband had it not in his power to leave you comfortably off in any other manner. All the settlement he could make on you at your marriage,—I really don't think it will amount to more than six hundred a-year,—he did make. This, of course, is yours in addition; and it will be your child's after you."

"Think of the contrast," was the rejoinder; and Mrs. St. John's bosom heaved ominously, as if the wrong were almost too great to bear. "The one with his thousands upon thousands, his title—his state—his everything that's high and mighty; the other, with his few poor hundreds and his obscurity."

"But, my dear Charlotte, there was no help for this. Benja was born to it, and Mr. Carleton could no more alter it than you could."

"It is not the less unjust."

"Unjust is not the proper word. The law of entail may not be an equitable law, but Englishmen live under it, and must obey it. You should not blame your husband for this."

"I do not blame him for it."

"You cast blame on his will, which is the same thing."

Mrs. St. John was leaning back in the chair, the broad lappets of her cap thrown off from her face; her elbows rested on the arms of the chair, and she pressed the tips of her fingers nervously together. The slight storm had outwardly passed, and all her habitual coldness of manner had returned to her.

"Why did he insert that codicil to it?"

"Was there a codicil? What was it? But I don't know what the will itself was, Charlotte."

"He had left the children under my exclusive guardianship. They were to reside at the Hall here with me, subject to their necessary absences for education, and he willed that a sum of four thousand a-year should be paid to me."

"Well?" said Mrs. Darling, for she had stopped.

"That was in the will. But the codicil altered this, and Benja's residence with me is to be subject to the pleasure of Mr. Isaac St. John. He has it in his power to remove Benja from me if he sees fit; and if Benja is so removed, two thousand of the four are to be withdrawn, and my allowance

reduced thereby by half. Why did George do this? Why did he do it in secret, and never say a word to me?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Mrs. Darling, who was revolving the news in her mind. "Benja to be removed from you at the pleasure of Isaac St John? But is he not helpless?"

"In body he may be next door to it, but not in power, as to Benja. This codicil was dated the day subsequent to a visit George paid Castle Wafer at the close of winter, a long while after the will was made. Isaac St. John must have put him up to it that day. I will pay him out, if I live."

"Well, I can't tell why he should have done it," cried Mrs. Darling, who was feeling altogether puzzled. "*He* does not want the two thousand a-year; he is a rich man and an invalid. Did you question him of his motives, Charlotte? I should."

"Question whom?—Isaac St. John? I have never seen him."

"Did he not come to the funeral?"

"No; he was too ill, they said. His brother came—handsome Fred. Mamma, I *hate* Isaac St. John."

"Hush, my dear. It is more than likely that he'll never interfere with you. I have always heard him spoken of as one of the most just and honourable men breathing."

"I don't like it to have been done. I don't like for the world to know that George could put the slight upon me. It is known everywhere. The servants know it. He desired that they should be present while the will was read. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"Your husband desired it?"

"He did; at least, Mr. Drake says so. When they were about to read the will, and I had come down into the drawing-room before them all, Mr. Drake said to me, 'I am going to call in the servants, with your permission; Mr. Carleton St. John desired me to do so.' I objected, but it was of no manner of use; Mr. Drake appeared not to hear me; and I could not make a fuss at a moment like that. But now, mamma, don't you see the drift?"

"N——o," said Mrs. Darling, possessing no idea of Charlotte's meaning.

"I do," said Charlotte, the keen look sometimes seen in them gleaming from her unfathomable eyes. "That will was read out to the servants



on purpose that they might know they have it in their power to carry tales to Isaac St. John. I hate him ! I hate him ! But for him, I am sure my husband would have entrusted me entirely with Benja. Who is so fitting to bring him up as I ? ”

“ And I think you will bring him up, Charlotte. I don't understand all this that you are telling me ; but I feel little doubt Isaac St. John will be all that is courteous and kind. Whilst you do your part by Benja, there can be no plea for removing him. You *will* do it ? ”

“ I shall do it, certainly ; ” and Mrs. St. John fully meant what she said ; “ I shall make no distinction between the boys. If Benja needs correcting, I shall correct him. If Georgy needs correcting, I shall correct *him*. The thing's easy enough, and simple enough ; and there was not the least call for interference with me. What I dislike most, is George's having kept it from me.”

“ I daresay he did not think to mention it to you,” said Mrs. Darling, soothingly ; and it was notable of observation that she was in the habit of smoothing things to her daughter always, as though she were afraid of her. “ And you are quite right, my dear, not to make any difference between the children ; your husband did not.”

"Not outwardly, in a general way. In his heart, though, he loved the one and not the other; and I love the other and not the one. Oh, Georgy! Georgy! if you were but the heir!"

"That's an unprofitable thought, Charlotte. Don't indulge it. Benja was the first-born."

"How can I help indulging it? Georgy is *my* first-born, and it seems as a wrong done him—done us both."

"My dear, where's the use? You married George Carleton St. John with your eyes open, in defiance of me. It is too late to repent now."

"I don't repent. I would marry him again to-morrow, though he had two heirs instead of one. But I can't help—I can't help——"

"What can't you help?"

"Never mind. The position is unalterable, and there's no good in dwelling upon it. Mamma, I shall never speak of this again. If you want particulars of the will for anything else, you can get them from old Drake. Tell me now all about Rose and her rebellion. I have often thought I should like her to live here when she leaves school."

*Why*, Mrs. Darling could not have told; but

her mind felt the greatest relief when Charlotte thus quitted the subject. It was next to impossible that any child could have been born with a disposition so jealous as had Charlotte Norris ; and Mrs. Darling had been pleased, but for the curtailing her income, that Benja should be removed from her. She had no fear that Charlotte would be unkind to him ; systematically unkind she believed Charlotte would not be to anyone ; but, so long as the boy was with her, the sight of him must and would tend to keep alive the jealousy she felt on Georgy's account. Two thousand a-year, however, in Mrs. Darling's estimation, was—two thousand a-year.

Willingly she turned to the topic named by Charlotte—her youngest, her troublesome, but most lovable daughter. And it is quite time, my reader, that you made her acquaintance also. To do which it is necessary to go over the water.

## CHAPTER X.

MISS ROSE DARLING.

You all know that crowded seaport town on the other side the water—Belleport-on-the-Sea; and are therefore aware that its educational establishments, good, bad, and indifferent, are numerous. But I must ask you not to confound the one you are about to enter, Madame de Nino's, with any of those others, no matter what their merits may be. The small, select, and most costly establishment of Madame de Nino was of the very highest standing; it was intended solely for the reception of gentlemen's daughters—was really confined to them; and no pupil could be admitted to it without an undeniable introduction. It was perhaps the only French school to which anxious parents could confide a daughter free from doubt on the score of her associations: whatever her fellow-pupils might be

in mind and manners, they were sure to be of gentle birth.

On that very same day that took Mrs. Darling down to Alnwick Hall on the visit to her widowed daughter, Madame de Nino's pupils were gathered in the large school-room. Class was over for the day, and the girls were tired enough. They hated Fridays. There was no dancing, no drawing, no walking; nothing but hard unbroken learning, writing, and practising.

Look at this class of elder girls, their ages varying from sixteen to twenty, sitting on a bench at the first-class desk-table. Those in the middle sit very back, their spines crooked into a bow, those beyond them on either side sit rather forward, and the two end girls are turned, each sideways, an elbow on the desk; so that they form a semi-circle. They are gossiping away in English, which is against the rules; but the teachers are fatigued likewise with the long and hot day, and do not pay attention. The studying for the prizes had begun, and during that period the work was greatly augmented, both of pupils and teachers.

Regard well the three middle girls. We shall have little to do with the others, but a great deal with them. And they are noticeable besides, for

two of them are beautiful, but so unlike in their beauty. The one is a very Hebe, with laughing blue eyes, brilliant complexion, and a shower of golden curls; and she is Mrs. Darling's youngest daughter, Rose. The other is Adeline de Castella, a name and face fit for a romance in history. She is graceful, charming, with dark-brown eyes and hair, and more exquisite features than were ever carved from marble. The third is Mary Carr, quiet and ladylike, whose good sense served to keep the wildness of Miss Rose Darling somewhat in check. For Rose was one of the wildest girls that had ever kept alive Madame de Nino's staid and most respectable school; wild, wilful, clever, careless; and vain as a peacock.

Had Rose been of a more sedate disposition, less given to random ways, Mrs. Darling might not have kept her at school so long, for Rose was eighteen. She was dreadfully rebellious over it, and perhaps the judiciousness of the measure, as a restriction, may be questioned. Mrs. Darling, by way of soothing the pill, allowed Rose to visit much; and when the girls came to this age, Madame de Nino acquiesced in the parents' wishes; but Rose went out more than any previous pupil had ever been known to do. She had

many friends sojourning in the town, and was courted on her own account, being excessively liked by everybody. Always in scrapes of one sort or another, or getting out of them, was she : and she had her own way in the school, and *would* have it.

One of Miss Rose Darling's propensities was to be continually falling in love. Nearly every time she went out, she would favour the envious girls, on her return, with a description of some fresh cavalier who had laid siege to her heart ; for half her pleasure in the thing lay in these boasts to her companions. The last idea of the kind had prevailed longer than usual. A gentleman, whom she had only seen at church or in their walks, was the new gallant. Rose did not know his name, but he was very handsome, and she raved of him. The school called him her fiancé ; not in the least to Rose's displeasure. On this evening, as you look at them, Rose is in a state of semi-explosion, because one of the other girls, Miss Caroline Davis, who had been fetched out that evening by her friends, was now telling Rose that she had seen this gentleman as she was being conducted back to Madame de Nino's.

"That comes of my being kept at school.

Mamma ought to be punished. You be quiet, Mary Carr! I shall talk against my mother if I like. Where did you see him, Carry Davis?"

"In the Grand Rue. He was strolling up it. My aunt bowed to him."

"I know he was watching for me! These horrid Friday evenings! I wish the school could take scarlet fever, or something of that, and then perhaps Madame might send us out every day! Your aunt must know him, Davis, if she bowed: didn't you ask his name?"

"No, I forgot to ask it."

"What an idiot you are! If I don't learn it in a day or two I shall go mad. He——"

"Hush!" whispered Caroline Davis. "See how those French are listening! They'll go and tell Mademoiselle that we are speaking English. There's a new pupil come in to-night," she added aloud, in the best French she could call up.

"Not a pupil," dissented Adeline de Castella. "She used to be a pupil, but is coming now on a sort of visit to Madame, during her mother's absence in England. They have been travelling lately in Italy."

"Who is she?" asked Rose. "What's her name?"



"Eleanor Seymour. Her mother is the Honourable Mrs. Seymour; she was the daughter of Lord Loftus," continued Adeline, who spoke English perfectly, and understood our grades of rank as well as we do. "Eleanor Seymour is one of the nicest girls I know; but I suppose she will not be Eleanor Seymour very long, for she is engaged to Mr. Marlborough."

"Who's Mr. Marlborough?" asked Rose again.

"I don't know him," said Adeline, "He is very rich, I believe; he is staying at Belleport."

"Le souper, mesdemoiselles," called out Made-moiselle Henriette, the head teacher.

I don't like the plan of introducing you, my readers, to so many people, raising so many interests, as it were; but this temporary sojourn of Eleanor Seymour at the school was to bear its fruit, not pleasant fruit for Rose, and you must hear of it, for you would never understand her character so well otherwise: not if I wrote pages and pages. The events to which it gave rise, and their final result, had the effect of bringing Rose more entirely to her sober senses, than ten years of admonition would have done. For this reason, Eleanor Seymour, and some particulars regarding

her, must be spoken of: otherwise it is but an episode in the story.

As Adeline de Castella said, her mother was the Honourable Mrs. Seymour and the daughter of Lord Loftus. Being this, Mrs. Seymour held her head higher, and was allowed to do it, than anybody else in the Anglo-French watering-place, and prided herself on her "blood." It sometimes happens that where this "blood" predominates, other requisites are in scarcity; and it was so with Mrs. Seymour. She was so poor that she hardly knew how to live: her aristocratic relatives helped her out, and they had paid Eleanor's heavy school bills, and so she got along somehow. Her husband, Captain Seymour, dead this many a year ago, had been of even higher connections than herself; also poor. Lord Loftus had never forgiven his daughter for marrying the portionless young officer; and to be even with her, erased her name from his will. She was a tall, faded lady now, with a hooked nose and supercilious grey eyes.

When Eleanor left school—as accomplished a young lady as ever Madame de Nino's far-famed establishment turned out—she went on a visit to her aristocratic relatives on both sides, and then

travelled to Italy and other places with her mother. This spring they had returned, having been away two years, and settled down in the old place. The tattlers said (and if you want tattle in perfection, go to any of these idle continental watering-places) that Eleanor would never get the opportunity of changing away the name of Seymour: men of rank would not be very likely to seek one situated as she was, and Mrs. Seymour would never allow Eleanor to marry any other. The battle was soon to come.

There came into Belleport one day, on his road to Paris, a good-looking young fellow named George Marlborough. Mrs. Seymour was introduced to him at the house of a friend, and though she bowed (figuratively) to his personal attractions, she turned up her haughty nose afterwards when alone with Eleanor, and spoke of him contemptuously. One of the rich commoners of England, indeed! she slightly said; she hated commoners, especially these rich ones, for they were apt to forget the broad gulf that lay between them and the aristocracy. The old Marlborough, Mr. George's father, had begun life as a clerk or a servant—she could not tell which, neither did it matter—and had plodded on, until he was the

proprietor of an extensive trade, and of great wealth. Iron works, or coal works; or it might be cotton works; something down in the North, she believed; and this George, the eldest son, had been brought up to be an iron man too—if it was iron. She desired Eleanor to be very distant with him, if they met again: he had seemed inclined to talk to her.

Now poor Eleanor Seymour found this difficult to obey. Mr. George Marlborough remained in the town instead of going on to Paris, and was continually meeting Eleanor. She, poor girl, had not inherited her mother's exclusive notions; labour as Mrs. Seymour would, she had never been able to beat them into her; and Eleanor grew to like these meetings just as much as Mr. Marlborough did. It was the old tale—they fell in love with each other.

Mrs. Seymour, when the news was broken to her, lifted her haughty eyelids on George Marlborough, and expressed a belief that the world was coming to an end. It might not have been disclosed to her quite so soon, but that she was about to depart for England on a lengthened visit to an elder sister, from whom she cherished expectations, during which absence Eleanor was to be the guest

of Madame de Nino. Mr. Marlborough, who had never once been admitted within Mrs. Seymour's house, took the opportunity of asking for an interview one evening that he had walked from the pier in attendance on them, by Eleanor's side. With a slight gesture of surprise, a movement of her drooping eyelids, the lady led the way to the drawing-room, and Eleanor escaped up-stairs.

She sat in her own room, listening. About ten minutes elapsed—it seemed to Eleanor like as many hours—and then the drawing-room bell was rung. Not loud and fast, as though her mother were in anger, but quietly. The next moment she heard Mr. Marlborough's step, as he was shown out of the house. Was he rejected? Eleanor thought so.

The bell rang sharply now, and a summons came for Eleanor. She trembled from head to foot as she went down.

"Eleanor!" began her mother in her sternest tone, "you knew of this application to me?"

Eleanor could not deny it. She burst into frightened, agitated tears.

"The disgrace of having encouraged the addresses of an iron man! It is iron: he made no scruple of avowing it. Indeed, you may well

cry! Look at his people—all iron too: do you think they are fit to mate with ours? His father was nothing but a working man, and has made himself what he is by actual labour, and the son didn't blush when he said it to me! Besides—I hope I may be forgiven for plotting and planning for you—but I have always hoped that you would become the wife of John Seymour."

"His wife," sobbed Eleanor. "Oh mamma, John Seymour's nobody."

"Nobody!" echoed the indignant lady. "Lord John Seymour nobody!"

"But I don't like him, mother."

"Ugh!" growled Mrs. Seymour. "Listen. I have not accepted the proposals of this Mr. Marlborough; but I have not rejected them. I must say he seems liberal enough and rich enough; proposing I don't know what of settlements; but these low-born people are often lavish. So now, if you have made up your mind to abandon your rank and your order, and every good that makes life valuable, and to enter a family who don't possess as much as a crest, you must do so. Mr. Marlborough obligingly assured me your happiness was centred in him."

Ah, what mattered the contempt of the tone,

while that sweet feeling of joy diffused itself through Eleanor's heart?

"No reply now," continued Mrs. Seymour, sternly. "The decision lies with you; but I will not have you speak in haste. Take the night to reflect on the advantages you enjoy in your unblemished descent; reflect well before you take any step to sully it. To-morrow you can announce your answer."

You need not ask what Eleanor's answer was. And so, when she entered on her visit at Madame de Nino's, she was an engaged girl; and the engagement was already known to the world.

Miss Seymour requested that she might be treated entirely as a pupil. She asked even to join the classes, laughingly saying to Madame de Nino that it would rub up what she had forgotten. She took her place in the school-room accordingly. Rose Darling saw a pale girl, with dark hair and a sweet countenance; and Rose criticised her mercilessly, as she did every one with pretensions to beauty. Another of the school-girls, named Emma Mowbray, a surly, envious girl, whom nobody liked, made ill-natured remarks on Eleanor. Miss Seymour certainly presented a contrast to some of them, with her beautifully-arranged hair,

her flowing muslin dress, and her delicate hands. School-girls, as a whole, are careless of their appearance *in* school ; and as a rule, they have red hands. Madame de Nino's pupils were no exception. Rose was vain, and therefore always well-dressed ; Adeline de Castella was always well-dressed ; but Emma Mowbray and others were not. Emma's hands, too, were red and coarse, more so than even those of the careless school-girls. Adeline's were naturally beautiful ; and Rose took so much care of hers, wearing gloves in bed in winter, with some mysterious pomade inside.

Rose made little acquaintance with Eleanor that day. She, Rose, went out to tea in the afternoon, and came back very cross : for she had not once set eyes on her fiancé. The story was told to Eleanor Seymour ; who sympathised with her of course, having a lover of her own.

The next day was Sunday. The French girls were conducted at ten o'clock to mass ; the English would leave the house as usual for church a quarter before eleven. Rose was dressed and waiting long before ; her impatience on Sunday mornings was great. Rose was in mourning, and a source of secret chagrin that fact was, for she liked gay clothes better than sombre ones.



"And so would you be worrying if you had some one waiting for you at the church as I have," retorted Rose, in answer to a remark on her restless impatience, which had been proffered to Miss Seymour by Emma Mowbray.

"Waiting for you?" returned Eleanor, looking at Rose, but not understanding.

"She means her lover, Miss Seymour," said Emma Mowbray.

"Yes, I do; and I don't care if I avow it," cried Rose, her face in a glow. "I know he loves me. He never takes his eyes off me in church, and every glance speaks of love."

"He looks up at the other schools as much as he looks at ours," said Emma Mowbray, who could rarely speak without a sneer. "Besides, he only returns the glances you give him: love or no love, he would be a sorry gallant not to do that."

"Last Thursday," cried Rose, unmindful of the reproof, "he smiled and took off his hat to me as the school passed him in the street."

"But little Annette Duval said she saw you nod to him first!" said Charlotte Singleton, the archdeacon's daughter.

"Annette Duval's a miserable little story-teller.

I'll box her ears when she comes in from mass. The fact is, Miss Seymour," added Rose, turning to the stranger who had come amidst them, "the girls here are all jealous of me, and Emma Mowbray doubly jealous. He is one of the divinest fellows that ever walked upon legs. You should see his eyes and his auburn hair."

"With a tinge of red in it," put in Emma Mowbray.

"Well, you must point him out to me," said Eleanor, and then hastened to change the conversation, for she had an instinctive dread of any sort of quarrelling, and disliked ill-nature. Emma Mowbray had not favourably impressed her: Rose had, in spite of her vanity and her random avowals. "You are in mourning, Miss Darling?"

"Yes, for my eldest sister's husband, Mr. Carleton St. John. But I have got a new white bonnet, you see, though he has not been dead many weeks: and I don't care whether mamma finds it out or not. I told the milliner she need not specify in the bill whether the bonnet was white or black. Oh dear! where *is* Mademoiselle Clarisse?"

Mademoiselle Clarisse, the teacher who took them to church (and who took also a book hidden

under her own arm to read surreptitiously during the sermon, not a word of which discourse could her French ears understand) came at last. As the school took its seats in the gallery of the church, the few who were in Rose's secret looked down with interest, for the gentleman in question was then coming up the middle aisle, accompanied by a lady and a little girl.

"There he is!" whispered Rose to Eleanor, next to whom she sat, and her voice was as one glow of loving exultation, and her cheeks flushed crimson. "Going into the pew below. There: he is handing in the little girl. Do you see?"

"Yes," replied Eleanor. "What of him?"

"It is *he*. He whom the girls tease me about, my fiancé, as they call him, I trust my future husband. That he loves me, I am positive."

Eleanor answered nothing. Her face was as red as Rose's just then; but Rose was too much occupied with something else to notice it. The gentleman—who was really a handsome young man—was looking up at the gallery, and a bright smile of recognition, meant for one of them, shone on his face. Rose naturally took it to herself.

"Did you see that? *did* you see that?" she

whispered right and left. "Emma Mowbray, who took first notice now?"

The service began. At its conclusion Rose pushed unceremoniously out of the pew, and the rest followed her, in spite of precedent, for the schools waited until last; and in spite of Mademoiselle Clarisse. But, on the previous Sunday, Rose had been too late to see him: he had left the church. On this, as the event proved, she was too early, for he had not come out; and Mademoiselle Clarisse, who was in a terrible humour with them for their rudeness, marched them home at a quick pace.

"If ever truth and faith were in man, I know they are in him!" raved Rose when they got home, and were in the dressing-room. "He'll make the best husband in the world."

"You have not got him yet," cried Emma Mowbray.

"Bah! Did you see the look and smile he gave me? Did *you* see it, Miss Seymour?—and I don't suppose you are prejudiced against me as these others are. There was true love in that smile, if ever I saw love. That ugly Mademoiselle Clarisse, to have dragged us on so! I wish she had been taken with apoplexy on the

steps! He—— where's Miss Seymour gone to?" broke off Rose, for Eleanor had quitted the dressing-room without taking off her things.

"I heard her say she was invited to dine at Mrs. Marlborough's," answered Mary Carr.

"I say! there's the dinner bell. Make haste, all of you! I wonder they don't ring it before we get home!"

That afternoon Madame de Nino conducted the girls to church herself. A truly good Catholic, as she was, she was no bigot, and now and then sat in the English church. The young ladies did not thank her. They were obliged to be on church-behaviour then: there could be no inattention with her; no staring about, however divine might be the male part of the congregation; no rushing out early or stopping late, according to their own pleasure. Rose's lover was not there, and Rose fidgeted on her seat; but just as the service began, the lady and little girl they had noticed in the morning came up the aisle, and he followed by the side of Eleanor Seymour. The girls did not dare to bend forward to look at Rose, Madame being there. The tip of her pretty nose, all that could be seen of her, was very pale.

"The forward creature! the deceitful good-for-nothing!" broke from Rose Darling's lips when they got home. "You girls have called me bold, but look at that brazen Eleanor Seymour! She never saw him until this morning: I pointed him out to her in church for the first time; and she must go and make acquaintance with him in this barefaced manner! As sure as she lives I'll expose her to Madame de Nino! A girl like that would contaminate the school! If our friends knew we were exposed to her companionship, they'd remove——"

Rose's passionate words were cut short by the entrance of Madame herself, who came in to give some instructions to the teachers, for she was going out for the evening. Rose, too angry to weigh her words or their possible consequences, went up to Madame, and said something in a confused fast tone. Madame de Nino, a portly, dark-eyed, kind woman, concluded her directions, and then turned to Rose, who was a favoured pupil.

"What do you say, Mademoiselle Rose? Did I see the gentleman who was at church with Miss Seymour? Yes; a very prepossessing young man. I spoke with him to-day when they came for her."

A moment's puzzled wonder, and then a frightful thought took hold of Rose.

"Do you know him, Madame?" she gasped.

"Who is he?"

"Young Mr. Marlborough. Mademoiselle Eleanor is betrothed to him."

Madame left the room. And the girls sat, breathless with astonishment, scarcely daring to steal a glance at Rose Darling's white and stony features.

## CHAPTER XI.

### MISS ROSE'S ELOPEMENT.

THIS chapter must also be given to Rose, if we are to hear the conclusion of the episode whose results were to exercise so great an influence over her feelings, her inward life.

The weeks had gone on, and they were now in the sultry days of August, most of the girls studying away might and main for the prizes. A day-pupil had temporarily entered the school, Anna Marlborough, the youngest of the Marlborough family, and the only one who had come abroad with her mother. It was not Madame de Nino's habit to admit day-pupils, but she had made an exception in favour of this child, who was to be in the town but a few weeks.

Will it be credited that Rose Darling was still pursuing her preposterous flirtation with George



Marlborough, in the face of the discovery that he was engaged to Eleanor Seymour? But there was something to be urged in her favour, though you are no doubt surprised to hear me say it. Had a jury been trying Rose, they might have returned a verdict, "Guilty, with extenuating circumstances." Rose seemed bewitched. There is no doubt that a real, an ardent passion for George Marlborough had arisen in her heart, filling its every crevice; and she regarded Eleanor (she could not help it) with a fierce jealous rivalry. But the girl, with all her random folly, was no fool; and but for certain events that arose, might have remained as quiescent as she could, until her ill-starred love had died out.

It did not, and could not, contribute to any good resolutions she might have had strength and sense to form, to find herself on intimate terms with Mr. Marlborough, a frequent visitor to his house. *That* mistake was in the first instance Eleanor Seymour's. Eleanor had been commissioned by Mrs. Marlborough to invite three or four of the young ladies to accompany her there to dinner; something was said in the school about her not *daring* to ask Rose; and Eleanor invited Rose forthwith. Rose went. It

had been more prudent had she stayed at home : but Rose was not one of the prudent sort ; and the temptation was irresistible. Mrs. Marlborough was charmed with her, and so was George. Whether the gentleman detected Rose's feelings for himself, and was flattered, or whether he had no objection in the world to a flirtation with a pretty girl, although engaged to another, certain it was he paid Rose considerable attention, and laughed and joked with her much.

*Joked* with her. It was all done, on his part, in the spirit of joking, as Eleanor Seymour might have seen ; but joking sometimes leads to something more. Messages from one to the other, begun in folly, often passed ; and Anna Marlborough, a giddy girl of twelve, was the go-between. Just upon this, Rose's brother, Captain Darling, came to Belleport ; he soon struck up a friendship with Mr. Marlborough, and here was another link in Rose's chain. She would meet the two young men in the street, and leave the ranks, in defiance of rules, ostensibly to shake hands with Frank, really to talk nonsense with Mr. Marlborough. Even Eleanor Seymour, when out with the school, would conform to its rules, and only bow and smile as he passed : not

so Rose. The girls would have gone the length of the street, two sometimes, before she caught them up, panting and flushed and looking radiant, and boasting of what George had said to her. It was of no use the teachers remonstrating and forbidding ; do it she would, and do it she did.

This was what may be called the open, harmless stage of the affair. But it was to go on to another.

There was a large party given one night at a Scotch laird's, Sir Sandy Maxwell, and Miss Seymour and Rose were invited. You may be aware perhaps that it is the custom in French schools, generally speaking, for the pupils to visit, or not, according to the directions left by the parents. This had been accorded to Rose by Mrs. Darling ; and Eleanor Seymour was not as a school-girl—therefore Madame de Nino, though openly expressing her disapprobation of these large parties while young ladies were still pursuing their studies, did not see fit to refuse. Emma Mowbray offered a bet to the school that Mr. Marlborough would dance more dances with Rose than with Eleanor ; and so eager were the girls to hear the result, that those in the large

*dortoir* kept awake until they came home. It had struck one o'clock, and Madame was up in arms; she had only given them to half-past eleven, and they had kept the coach waiting all that while, with Madame's own maid, old Félicité, inside it. After all, there was nothing to hear, for Mr. Marlborough had not made his appearance at the party.

Class was not over the next morning until very late; it always was late just before the giving of the prizes. It was the third Thursday in August, the *sorti* day, and some of the girls were going with Eleanor to dine at Mrs. Marlborough's: Rose, Mary Carr, and Adeline de Castella. The invitations were left to Miss Seymour, and she always fixed on Rose, in a sort of bravado, but she never once chose Emma Mowbray; and this gave that young lady considerable offence, as was known to the school. They were to partake of the usual dinner at school by way of luncheon, the Marlboroughs not dining until six. While the cloth was being laid the girls dispersed about, some in the court-yard, some in the garden, all in the shade, for it was very sultry. There was certainly something more than common the matter with Rose: she appeared half-crazy with joy.

"It is because she's going out," remarked Mary Carr to Eleanor.

"Is it, though!" put in Emma Mowbray; "that's only a little item in the cause. She has just had a love-letter from Mr. Marlborough."

Eleanor Seymour's cheek changed.

"Don't talk absurdities," said Mary Carr to the Mowbray girl.

"Absurdities!" she retorted, moving away. "If I can, I'll convince you."

A minute or two, and she came back with a letter in her hand—an open letter, addressed in George Marlborough's hand to Rose—and handed it to Mary Carr.

"Am I to read it?" asked the latter.

"If you choose. It is *pro bono publico*, Rose says." And Miss Carr read the letter aloud.

"MY DEAREST,

"You must have been surprised not to see me at Sir Sandy's. I was dressing to come, when a message arrived for me from the Hôtel du Nord; poor Priestley had met with a sad accident to his hand from the bursting of a gun. I have been sitting up with him until now, four o'clock A.M., but I write this to you before I

sleep, for you have a right now to my every thought, to know every movement. You dine here to-day, my fair fiancée also; but I wish you were coming alone.

“Ever yours only,

“GEORGE MARLBOROUGH.”

Was there any mistake in the letter? Mary Carr had often heard of such. *Could* it have been written to Rose? Alas, yes! it was all too plain. The writing was George Marlborough's; the address, “Miss Rose Darling, En Ville,” was his; and the seal, “G. M.,” was his also. Mary rose, and stood before Eleanor, shielding her from observation, as she beckoned to Anna Marlborough: while Emma Mowbray looked defiant, and asked whether they would believe her next time.

The child was dancing about the court-yard. She was young, and the school made her a sort of plaything: she came dancing up to Miss Carr.

“Now, Anna, I have something to ask you; and if you equivocate by so much as a word, I will acquaint Madame de Nino that there's a letter-carrier in the school; you would be ex-

pelled that same hour. Did you bring a note here from your brother this morning?"

"Yes, I did," stammered Anna. "Don't tell of me, please."

"I'll not tell, if you speak the truth. To whom did you bring it?"

"To Miss Darling."

"Did he send it to *her*? What did he say when he gave it to you?"

"He told me to give it into her own hands when nobody was by, and to give his love with it," answered Anna. "Oh, pray don't tell of me, Miss Carr! It's nothing much more than usual; he often sends his love by me to Miss Darling."

"Was *this* the letter you brought?" holding out the one she still retained in her hand.

"Yes, it was that. I'll never do it again," continued Anna, getting frightened, and bursting into tears.

Which caused Miss Mowbray to rate her for a "little fool;" and Anna ran away, glad to be released. Close upon that, up dashed Rose in agitation, having discovered the loss of her note. The note had *not* been declared by Rose to be pro bono publico, and Emma Mowbray had dis-

honourably abstracted it from her apron pocket. Rose got possession of it again, but she was in a great passion with Emma Mowbray : in fact, with them all.

And poor Eleanor Seymour ! She was white as marble when Mary turned to her. Sitting there, on the old wooden bench, so outwardly calm and still, she had heard the whole. Clasp- ing Mary Carr's hands with a painful pressure, she burst into an uncontrollable fit of weeping, and glided in at the porch-door to gain the stair- case. " Make any excuse for me at the dinner- table, Mary," she whispered.

Need you be told that that letter was really written to Eleanor ? The words " fair fiancée " in it alone related to Rose, and Mr. Marlborough had penned them in laughing allusion to the joke in the school. The plot was Emma Mowbray's, a little bit of revenge on Eleanor and Rose, both of whom she envied and disliked. She had made Anna her tool : the child, at her prompting, wrote a letter to Rose, and got her brother to direct and seal it ; and Emma Mowbray opened the two envelopes cleverly by means of passing a penknife under the seals, and substituted the one note for the other. Thus Eleanor's letter was conveyed



to Rose; the other Emma Mowbray burnt; and she promised a whole charette full of good things to Anna to keep her counsel. Being a mischief-loving little damsel, Miss Anna did so; though she was nearly frightened out of it by Miss Carr.

This may sound very shallow, very weak, but I do assure you the circumstances took place just as they are written. Had George Marlborough only put Eleanor's *name* in the note, the trick could not have been played. But he did not. And neither Rose nor Eleanor suspected for a moment that there was anything about the note not genuine; or that it had not been written to Rose.

They went to dinner at Mrs. Marlborough's—Eleanor with her beating heart of resentment and her outraged love, Rose radiant with happiness and beauty. The evening did not mend matters, but rather added very much to the broil. May the word be forgiven?—I was thinking of the French one. Eleanor, cold, haughty, contemptuous, was almost insulting to Mr. Marlborough; and Rose, it is to be feared, let him see, that evening, where her best love was given. He took more than one opportunity of asking Eleanor how he had offended her, but he could get no answer. If

she had but given him a clue to it, how much trouble and misery would have been saved ! But the very *asking* on his part seemed to Eleanor but the adding insult to injury. You see they were all at cross purposes ; and just for the want of a little word.

From that hour there was no peace, no mutual understanding between Eleanor and Mr. Marlborough. He repeatedly sought an explanation of the sudden change in her behaviour, sometimes by letter, sometimes by words. She never would give an answer to either. She returned his letters in blank envelopes, or tore them to pieces before the messenger's eyes ; she refused to see him if he called ; she haughtily held aloof from him when they met. Mrs. Marlborough saw that something was wrong, but as neither of them made her their confidante, she did not interfere, and she supposed it to be only a lovers' quarrel. She had not known Eleanor long, having come to Belleport only the week before that Sunday Rose first saw her at church. Rose alone seemed in a state of happiness, of ecstatic delight ; and Anna now carried no end of notes and messages to and fro, and kept it secret from the school. Rose had committed one great folly—she had written

to Mr. Marlborough after the receipt of that first letter. But then, it must be always remembered that no suspicion had yet crossed her mind that it was not *written to her* and meant for her. Rose fully believed—let it be her excuse—that Mr. Marlborough had transferred his affections from Eleanor to herself: the school believed it. Whether she really hoped she should succeed in supplanting Eleanor in the offer of marriage, in becoming afterwards his wife, cannot be told. The girls thought she did, and they were sharp observers. At any rate, Rose deemed the field as legitimately open to her now, as it was to Eleanor.

The day of awarding the prizes was a great day. The girls were attired in white, with blue sashes and blue neck-ribbons; and the hair-dresser arrived betimes in the morning to get done in time. A large company arrived by invitation; and just before the hour for going in, some of the girls saw Rose in the garden talking to a gentleman. Madéleine de Gassicourt, usually so short-sighted, espied her out.

“It must be her brodare wid her,” cried Madéleine, who was not in the secret. “She will derange her hair before we do go in.”

Emma Mowbray peered through the trees. It was no "brodare," but Mr. Marlborough. He was bending down to Rose; she appeared to be crying, and he held her hand in his as he talked to her earnestly. Emma Mowbray glanced round at Eleanor, who was at the window, and saw it all. She was very pale and still, her lips compressed.

But Rose's stolen interview could have lasted but a few fleeting minutes. The hands of the clock were then pointing towards two, and as the hour struck she was amongst them, and they were being marshalled for the entrance to the prize-room. It was a pleasing sight when they went in, making their reverences to the assembled visitors. Two pretty young English girls walked first—sisters; and certainly the two prettiest of the elders walked last; Rose Darling and Adeline de Castella; both beautiful, but so unlike in their beauty. Adeline gained nine prizes; Rose but two. But Rose had been studying for another sort of prize.

The holidays succeeded—dull and quiet. Of the elder girls, Adeline, Rose, and Mary Carr alone remained, and there was, of course, Miss Seymour. Mrs. Marlborough was leaving the

town; George not. Eleanor, who seemed to be visibly declining, would not go out anywhere, so she did not meet him; but Rose, always out, met him constantly.

One afternoon, when Eleanor was growing paler day by day, a bit of folded paper was brought to her in the school-room. She opened it, and saw a few words in pencil—

“I am now waiting in the salon. You have been denied to me as usual; yet, Eleanor, let me entreat you to grant me, for this once, an interview. I leave by the boat for London to-night, but if I can see you now, my voyage may not be necessary. By the love we once bore for each other, I beseech you, Eleanor, come.—G. M.”

Eleanor read it, tore the paper deliberately in two, and handed the pieces to Clotilde. “Give that to the gentleman,” she haughtily said, “There is no other answer.”

Rose followed the maid from the room. “Clotilde,” she whispered, “who is in the salon?”

“The handsome monsieur that was going to marry himself, as people said, with Mademoiselle Seymour,” was the servant’s rejoinder.

“Give me the answer,” said Rose, taking the torn pieces from her hand. “I want to send a

message to madame, his mother, and will deliver this. I say, Clotilde, don't tell Madame that he's here."

The servant, unsuspecting, went about her business; and Miss Rose tripped to the salon, and stayed as long as she dared.

That same evening Eleanor Seymour was giving Mary Carr a description of Rome; they were seated in a corner of the small class-room; and Adeline de Castella corrected her when she was wrong, for *she* knew Rome well. Mademoiselle Joséphine (Mam'selle Fifine, the school called her in general), the only teacher remaining, was at her table in front of the window, writing letters. When it grew too dark to see, she shut her desk, turned round, and in a sudden sort of voice, as if surprised not to see her with the others, asked where Rose was.

The young ladies did not know. Rose had been upstairs in the bedroom since the afternoon. She came down for collation, and went up again directly.

Mam'selle Fifine began to scold; she was the crossest of all the teachers, except Mam'selle Clarisse. It was not likely Miss Rose was stopping upstairs in the dark; she must have got a

light, which, as Mesdemoiselles knew well, was contrary to rules. And she told Miss Carr to go and desire her to come down.

Mary Carr rose with a yawn; they had been sitting there long, and she felt cramped. "Who will go with me?" she asked.

Both the young ladies responded, and all three stumbled up the dark staircase together. They found no light in the bedrooms, and could see nothing of Rose. Thinking it possible she might have fallen asleep on one of the beds, Adeline ran down and got a candle from one of the servants.

There was no Rose; but on her bed lay a sealed note, addressed to Miss Carr:—

"DEAR MARY,

"I know you have been against me for some time. Miss Seymour and I were rivals—equals on a fair ground; you would have helped *her* on, though it left me to a broken heart. I believe it has been a neck-and-neck race between us, but I have won. I hope mamma will reconcile herself to the step I am taking; I always longed to make a runaway marriage, it is so romantic; and if Frank flies out about it, I shan't

care, for I shan't hear him. When next you see me I shall be

“ROSE MARLBOROUGH.”

“Look to Miss Seymour!” broke from the quivering lips of Adeline de Castella. And it was timely spoken, for Eleanor was fainting. Scarcely had she revived, when Mam’selle Fifine came up, angry at the delay.

The note they did not dare to show; but were obliged to confess to the absence of Rose, saying *tout bonnement*, as Adeline called it, that they could not find her.

Rose not to be found! Madame de Nino was dining out, and Mam’selle Fifine was terrified out of her sober senses. In the midst of the hubbub that ensued, Julie, the head fille-de-chambre, put her head in at the door, and said, “The Honourable Mrs. Seymour.”

At a time of less commotion they would have burst out laughing. Julie had been nurse in a nobleman’s family in England; she had there become familiar with British titles, and as fond of using them as she was of using her English. One day Ethel Daw’s mother came to see her; a very fine lady, all flounces, and feathers, and gold chains,



It was Julie's luck to show her to the salon: and she came to the school-room afterwards, flung open the door, and called out "Mrs. Daw, Esquire." Julie did not hear the last of that. The girls called her ever after Squire Daw.

"The Honourable Mrs. Seymour."

With a sharp cry Eleanor started up, and flew into her mother's arms, sobbing convulsively.

"Oh, mamma, take me home! take me home!"

Mrs. Seymour was thunderstruck, not only at Eleanor's cry of pain, but at the change in her appearance. She had just returned from London. Mary Carr disclosed a little of the truth. She thought it best; and, indeed, was unable to evade the keen questioning of Mrs. Seymour. But Rose's note, with the information it contained, was buried in silence still. Mrs. Seymour took her daughter home at once; and there Eleanor told the whole—that Rose had really gone away with Mr. Marlborough. Mrs. Seymour folded her aristocratic hands, and distinctly desired that no further allusion to it should ever pass her daughter's lips, as it would not her own. It was a retribution on them, she said, for having trusted an "iron man."

Meanwhile, Adeline de Castella and Mary Carr kept their own counsel through sheer obligation; as they had not declared all they knew at once, they dared not declare it now. And Madame de Nino verily believed Rose had been spirited away up to the skies.

It was three days afterwards. Mrs. Seymour sat in her drawing-room, the green Venetian shutters partially closed, and the blinds down, for Eleanor lay on the sofa in a sad state of prostration. Mrs. Seymour was in a state of as much indignation as was consistent with her high birth and her proclaimed assertion that they were "well rid of him;" for, in spite of the "iron" drawback, she had grown to hug to her heart the prospect of this most desirable establishment for Eleanor.

Suddenly the door opened, and the iron man himself walked in. Eleanor struggled up from the sofa, and Mrs. Seymour rose in *hauteur*, all the blood of the Loftuses flashing from her light grey eyes. Then ensued a contest; each side struggling for the mastership; Mrs. Seymour refusing to hold commune with him, and Mr. Marlborough insisting upon being heard.

He had gone to England three days ago in

search of her, he said ; he then found she had left for France, and he had followed her. His object was to request that she would lay her commands on Eleanor to afford him an explanation. Eleanor had been his promised wife ; and without offence on his part, without any manner of cause, her behaviour had suddenly changed to him. In vain he had sought an explanation of her ; she would afford him none ; and his only resource was to appeal to Mrs. Seymour. If Eleanor refused to fulfil her engagement with him, he could not insist upon it ; but he must insist upon knowing the cause of the change : to that he had a right.

“ You had better leave the room quietly, sir,” said Mrs. Seymour in frigid tones. “ It will not be pleasant to you if I call my servants.”

“ I will not leave it without an explanation,” he replied. “ Mrs. Seymour, you cannot refuse it ; if Eleanor will not give it me in courtesy, I repeat that I must demand it as a right. Eleanor’s conduct at the time seemed to imply that there was some cause of complaint against me. What was it ? I declare to you solemnly that I was unconscious of it ; that I was innocent of offence against her.”

His words and manner were painfully earnest and truthful, and Mrs. Seymour was staggered.

"Has there been any mistake, Eleanor?" she hesitated, appealing to her daughter.

"Oh let me know what it is," he implored, before Eleanor could speak. "Whatever it may be—mistake—cause—reality—let me know it."

"Well, sir," cried Mrs. Seymour, making a sudden resolution, "I will first ask you what you have done with that unfortunate young lady, whom you took away from her sheltering roof and her duties, three days ago?"

"I took no young lady away," replied Mr. Marlborough.

"What have you done with Miss Darling?"

"Not anything."

"You did not induce her to elope with you? You did not take her to London?"

"Indeed, no. I saw Miss Darling on the port the evening I went away, and left her there. She was with her brother. But this is no explanation, Mrs. Seymour. Eleanor," he added, walking up, and standing before her, "I once again appeal to you. What was the cause of your first and sudden coldness?"

"Speak out, Eleanor," said her mother. "I

know almost as little as Mr. Marlborough, but I now think the matter should be cleared up, that we may come at the truth. There must be a strange mystery somewhere."

Eleanor pressed her thin hands upon her side in agitation. She could only speak in a whisper, in uneven sentences: and she told of the love-letter written to Rose the day following the dance at Sir Sandy Maxwell's.

"It was written to you, Eleanor," said Mr. Marlborough.

"I read that note," she answered, gasping for breath. "It was written to Rose."

"It was written to you, Eleanor. I have never written a loving note, as that was, to Rose Darling in my life; on my sacred word of honour."

"You have written several notes to Rose!"

"True; since; but never loving ones: they might all have been pasted up on the school-room walls, and even Madame de Nino herself could not have found fault with them. If this note was given to Rose, Anna must have changed the envelopes. I remember directing one for her to Miss Darling that morning. Eleanor," he gravely said, "I fear you have been running your head against a chimera."

"Rose loves you," she whispered, her heart and voice alike softening.

"No; nonsense!" — but for all his denial there was a glow of consciousness on Mr. Marlborough's countenance. "Eleanor, I honestly believe that you have been listening to the folly talked by those school girls and taken it for gospel. Rose Darling is very pretty, and likes to be admired; and if I have been thrown a good deal with her, who threw me? You, Eleanor, by your coldness and avoidance of me. I don't deny that I have talked lightly and gaily with Rose, never seriously; I don't deny that—" I have kissed her, he was going to add in his candour, but thought it might be as well to leave that out before Mrs. Seymour. "But my love and my allegiance have never swerved from *you*, Eleanor."

She burst into happy tears. Mrs. Seymour cut them short sternly.

"Eleanor, this note that you talk of, left by Miss Darling on her bed the other night, must have been meant as a hoax upon you and the two credulous young ladies, your companions. I did think it a most strange thing that a young lady of position should be guilty of anything so vulgar

as an elopement. Not but that it was excessively bad to make it the subject of even a jest."

"I suppose it must have been," sobbed Eleanor. "And it seemed so earnest!"

Mr. Marlborough could have disclosed *how* earnest, had he chosen. In that interview in the salon with Rose, when he told her he was going away, he learnt how much she loved him. In the anguish of parting, Rose dropped words that sufficiently enlightened him—if he had not been enlightened before. He passed it all off as a jest; he said something to the effect that he had better take her with him to Gretna, all in a jesting tone, in simple folly: and he spoke in this light manner for Rose's sake: he would not suffer her to think she had betrayed her secret. What, then, was his astonishment when, in coming out of the permit office at night on the port, preparatory to stepping on board the boat, to see Rose! *She had taken his words as serious ones.* What he would have done to save the boat in his dilemma—for he must inevitably have lost it while he escorted Rose back to Madame de Nino's—he did not know; but at that moment who should come up but Captain Darling. He

gave the young lady into her brother's charge, with a half word of explanation; and he never supposed but that Rose had been safely lodged at school within the hour. But Mr. Marlborough was a man who could keep his counsel on these particulars, even to Eleanor, and he did keep it.

"Let this be a warning to your wedded life, Eleanor," observed Mrs. Seymour. "Never have any concealments from your husband. Had you frankly spoken to Mr. Marlborough of that first misdirected letter, which seems to have been the primary cause of all the mischief, the affair would have been cleared up then."

"It's enough to make a man swear he will never use another envelope," exclaimed Mr. Marlborough, with his old happy smile of love. "But you need not have doubted me, Eleanor."

Meanwhile, where *was* Rose? Madame de Nino, in the eleventh stage of desperation and perplexity, sent ten times a day to Captain Darling's lodgings; but he had disappeared also. Mam'selle Fifine, who of course came in for the blame, alternately sobbed and scolded aloud; and Adeline and Mary Carr felt sick with the weight of the secret they were keeping. This state of things, stormy in doors as the weather was out,



lasted for three days, and then Rose returned, escorted by her brother.

But what a shocking plight she was in! Drenched with rain and sea-water; clothes soaked and clinging round her; quite prostrated with three days' sea-sickness; lying half dead all that time in a rolling fishing-smack, the wind blowing great guns and she nearly dead with fright; nothing to eat and drink on board but salt herrings and sour beer, even supposing she could have eaten!—no wonder Rose forgot her good manners and told her brother he was a brute for taking her. Rose had happened to put on her best things, too: a white chip bonnet and pearl-grey damask dress. You should have seen them when she came in!

So it was quite a mistake, Miss Carr and Adeline found, a trick, no doubt, played them purposely by Rose, and there had been no elopement at all, or thought of one: nothing but a three days' cruise round the coast with her brother, in the fishing-smack of some honest, rough, hard-working sailors! Captain Darling made a thousand apologies to Madame de Nino when he brought her home—the object that Rose presented upon his handing her out of the coach!

—and laid it all to the fault of that treacherous wind; which had kept them at sea three days, when he had only contemplated treating her to a little excursion for an hour for the good of her health.

Madame was appeased at length. But Mam'selle Fifine is sore upon the point to this day. As she justly observed, there must have been something out of common amiss with that particular fishing-boat. Granted the rough wind; but other boats made the port fast enough, so why not that one? Rose could or would give no explanation, and was as sullen as a bear for a whole month.

And ere that month had well run its course, news came down from Paris of the marriage of George Marlborough and Miss Seymour.

And the episode's over, and I'm glad of it. I don't like interruptions in a story any more than you do.

## CHAPTER XII.

### GEORGINA BEAUCLERC'S LOVE.

AND now we must go to Castle Wafer. Isaac St. John has his writing-table drawn to the open window this mellow September day, and sits at it. But he is not writing now. He leans back on his padded chair, and the lines of thought—of care—lie on his otherwise serene face. Care for Isaac St. John the recluse? Verily, yes; even for him. If we could live lives of utter isolation from our species, we might escape it; otherwise, never.

Looking at him now, his back buried in the soft chair, his face, so pleasant to the eye, turned rather upwards, and his thin white hands resting listlessly, one on the elbow of the chair, one down on his knee, a stranger would have failed to detect anything amiss with the person of Isaac St. John, or that it was not like other men's. For the first

forty years of Isaac St. John's existence, his days had been as one long, ever-present mortification ; that disfiguring hump and his sensitiveness doing battle together. Why it should be, I know not, but it is an indisputable fact, that where any defect of person exists, any deformity—two of the qualities pertaining to our nature exist in the mind in a supereminent degree, sensitiveness and vanity, perhaps for the good of the soul, certainly to the marring of its peace. It has been so since the world began ; it will be so to its ending. Isaac St. John was no exception. There never can be an exception ; for this seems a law of nature. Remember the club-foot of Byron, and what it did for him. This shrinking sensitiveness, far more than his ailing health, had converted Mr. St. John into a hermit. It was terrible to him to go forth unto the gaze of his fellow men, for—he carried his deformity with him. Now that he was advancing in years, getting onwards to be an old man, the feeling was wearing off ; the keen edge of the razor which had cut all ways was becoming somewhat blunt : but it must always remain with him in a greater or a less degree.

He was not thinking of it now. It was when

he was in the presence of others, or when making up his mind to go into their presence, that the defect was so painfully present to him. As he sat there, his brow knit with its lines, two things were troubling him: the one was a real, tangible care, the other was only a perplexity.

His own mother had lived to bring him up; and how she had cherished and loved her unfortunate son, the only heir to the broad lands of the St. Johns, that son's heart ached even now to think of. At the time she died, he wished he could die; his happiest thoughts now were spent in her remembrance; his most comforting moments those when he lost himself in the anticipation of the meeting that awaited them hereafter. He was a grown-up man, getting old it almost seemed to his lonely heart, when the little half-brother was born, the only issue of his father's second marriage. How Isaac St. John took to this little baby, loved it, fondled it, played with it, he might have been half ashamed to tell in words. The boy had been his; as his own; since the death of their father, he had been his sole care; and now that boy, grown to manhood, was going the way of the world and bringing trouble into his home. No very great and irre-

mediable trouble yet: but enough to pain and worry that sensitive heart that so loved him.

As if to compensate for the malformation of the one brother, the other was gifted with almost surpassing beauty. The good looks of Frederick St. John had become a proverb in the gay world. But these favoured sons of men are beset by temptations in an unusual degree, and perhaps they may not be much the better for the beauty in the long run. Had Frederick St. John been less high-principled by nature; or been less carefully and *prayerfully* trained by his brother Isaac, things might have been a great deal worse with him than they were. He had not parted with honour, but he *had* parted with money; a handsome patrimony which he had succeeded to when he became of age, was mortgaged thick and three-fold, and Mr. Frederick was deep in debt and embarrassment.

Mr. St. John glanced towards some letters lying on his table. The letters had brought the trouble to him. It would seem as if Frederick's affairs had in some way come to a sudden crisis, for these letters, three, had all arrived in the course of the past week: they were ugly letters from ugly creditors asking *him* to pay; and until

their reception Mr. St. John had not possessed any knowledge of the state of affairs. He had believed Frederick to be in the habit of getting rid of a great deal more money than he had need to do; but he had not glanced to debt, or to embarrassment. It had so completely upset him—a little thing did that in his delicate health—that for a day and a night he was incapable of action; he could only nurse his pain. Then he sent answers to the parties, saying that the matters should be examined into; and he wrote to Frederick, who was in London, to come to him without delay. He was waiting for him; the senses of his ears were opened now, listening for his footsteps: he was getting anxious and weary, for Frederick might have responded to the call on the past day.

That was the trouble. The other care mentioned, the perplexity, regarded his little cousin at Alnwick. He had promised George Carleton St. John (as you may remember) to take means of ascertaining whether Benja was well done by, happy, and cared for by his step-mother; but now that it came to practice, Isaac St. John did not quite see how he was to set about it. Something he must do; for the promise lay on his con-

science : and he was, of all, a conscientious man amidst the conscientious. Mr. Carleton St. John had died in May ; it was now September ; and Isaac knew little or nothing of the affairs at Alnwick. He had corresponded a little with Mrs. Carleton St. John in the intervals of his own illness—for he had been seriously ill twice this summer ; at the time of the death, and for some time after it, and again in July—and he had addressed two letters to Benja, simple letters fit for a child, and desired that that young gentleman would answer him by deputy. Somebody had scrawled these answers, probably the nurse. or guided Benja's fingers to do it. "He was very well, and Brave was very well, and he thanked his gardian, Mr. Saint John, for writing to him, and he hopped he was very well and he sent his love." This did not tell Mr. St. John much : and the involuntary thought crossed him that had Benja been her own child Mrs. St. John might herself have helped him with the answers.

He had therefore been making up his mind to go over to Alnwick, much as he disliked to show himself amidst strangers. But for this news concerning Frederick which had so troubled him,



and the expected arrival of his brother, he would have been already away ; but now he had put it off for a day or two. This was Tuesday ; and he thought, if all went well, and Frederick came to-day, he should go on Thursday. It was not the loss of the money that brought care to Isaac St. John ; his coffers were deep ; but the great fear that this young man, dear to him as ever son could be to father, might be falling into evil.

He was aroused from thought by the entrance of his attendant, Mr. Brumm. The master of Castle Wafer looked up wistfully : he had thought it might be another entering. The man, who knew every turn in that expressive countenance, from his many years' experience of it, noted the look, and hastened, so far as lay in him, to relieve it.

"It's not time yet, sir. The mid-day train can't above have got to Lexington. But Mr. Frederick's more likely to come by the five o'clock train than this : he mostly does."

"Have you mentioned in the house that I was expecting him, Brumm ?"

"No, sir. Will you have luncheon brought in here to-day, sir, or take it with Mrs. St. John and Lady Anne ?"

"Oh, I don't know"—and the sweet voice bore its sound of weariness. "I will take it with them to-day, I think, Brumm: they say I neglect them. Is it one o'clock?"

"Hard upon it, sir."

Mr. St. John rose. Ah, how changed from the delicate-faced man whose defects of form had been hidden! The hump was all too conspicuous now.

Passing out of the room, he crossed the inner hall, so beautiful with its soft rose-coloured hues, its tessellated pavement, and opened a door on the other side, where luncheon was laid. Two ladies entered almost at the same moment: the one was a tall, fine, still elegant woman, not much older than Mr. St. John himself, though she stood to him in the relation of step-mother; the other was an orphan daughter of the highest branch of the St. John family, the Lady Anne: a nice-looking girl of two or three and twenty, with dark-brown eyes and a pointed chin. Castle Wafer belonged exclusively to Isaac St. John; but his step-mother frequently resided at it. The utmost good-feeling and courtesy existed between them; and Frederick, her only son, and his half-brother, was the link that drew them together. Mrs. St. John never stayed there in the character

of visitor: Isaac would not allow it: but as its undisputed mistress. At these times, however, he lived a good deal in his own rooms. She had been there about a month now, and had brought with her this young cousin, Lady Anne. It had been a cherished project in the St. John family, that Lady Anne St. John should become the wife of Frederick. All wished it. The relatives on both sides wished it: they were several degrees removed from each other in relationship, she was an heiress, he would inherit Castle Wafer: altogether it was very suitable. But the parties themselves—were they eager for the tie? Ah, less was known about that.

Mrs. St. John gave vent to an exclamation of pleasure, for the sight of her step-son amidst them was somewhat rare. He shook hands with her, and then Anne St. John came merrily up to be kissed. She was very fond of Isaac, and he of her. Nearly the only friend he had had in life, as these men of rare minds count friendship, had been the earl, Anne's father.

"Mrs. St. John," he said, as they were at table, Brumm alone being in the room in attendance on his master, for sometimes the merest trifle of exertion, even the lifting of a plate, the filling of

a glass, was a trouble to Isaac, "will you believe that I am contemplating a journey?"

"A journey! You, Isaac!" exclaimed Lady Anne before Mrs. St. John could speak. "I hope it is to take us somewhere!"

"My dear Anne, it is no doubt a day's drive round the farm in his low carriage," said Mrs. St. John, smiling. "Mr. St. John calls that a journey. Am I right, Isaac?"

"Not this time. No; it is a longer journey than that. It will take me five or six hours' hard posting, with good roads and four good horses."

"Oh, Isaac!"—and the interruption was again Lady Anne's—"how can you continue to travel post when there's the rail so handy?"

"I do not like the rail," said Isaac, quietly.

"Well, I hope you will find the relays. I thought all the old posting horses were dead and buried."

"I have not found a difficulty yet, Anne. Brumm here sends on to secure them."

"But where is it that you are going, Isaac?" asked Mrs. St. John.

"To Alnwick."

"To Alnwick!"—she seemed very much surprised.

"I think I ought to go," said Isaac, speaking in his grave, earnest, thoughtful manner. "Poor George left his boy partly in my charge, as you know; but what with ill-health, and my propensity to shut myself up, which gets harder to break through every year, I have allowed too long a time to elapse without seeing him. It has begun to lie upon my conscience: and whenever a thing does that, I can't rest until I take steps to remedy it."

"The little boy is in his own home with his mother," observed Mrs. St. John. "He is sure to be all right."

"I do not fear that he is not. I should be very much surprised to find that he is not. But that probable fact does not remove from me the responsibility of ascertaining it."

"By the way," exclaimed Mrs. St. John; "was there not some codicil appended to the will, giving you power to remove the boy from his mother's guardianship if you thought fit? What could have been George St. John's motive for inserting it? I suppose she is not unkind to him?"

"Rather the contrary, I fancy," replied Mr. St. John. "From George's interview with me, a

sort of impression was left on my mind that he feared his wife would spoil the boy with kindness."

"What is the boy's name?" asked Lady Anne. "George, I suppose, after his father? How strange it is that those St. Johns of Alnwick should die off so?"

"His name is Benjamin Carleton. The little one is George."

"The little one? Oh yes, of course; the present Mrs. Carleton has a son. I had forgotten it. When do you go, Mr. St. John? How dull we shall be! I suppose you cannot return the same day?"

"I think I shall go on Thursday, and shall return on Friday. As for dullness, Anne, it does not make much difference to that whether I am at home or whether I am out."

"Yes it does. The very fact of knowing that you are not in the house imparts a sense of dullness to us."

Mr. St. John smiled, and raised his soft dark eyes to hers. The fingers of one thin hand had been wandering amidst the crumbs of his bread, putting them into circles or squares: a habit of his when he talked at table, though perhaps an

unconscious one. He did not eat much, and had generally finished long before others.

"I hope, Anne, you and Mrs. St. John will have somebody here by Thursday, who will be a more effectual remedy for dulness than I could be at my best. Mrs. St. John, I am expecting Frederick."

"Oh!" The mother's heart leaped within her; the bright flush of expectancy rose to her cheek; a fair and soft cheek still, for all her fifty years. "When?"

"I hope he will be here to-day. I think he may even have come by this morning's train."

"When did you hear from him?" returned Mrs. St. John.

"Not at all, lately. But I wish to see him on a little matter of business, and have written to him to come down. Are you glad, Anne?"

"I am so glad that I can't express it," was the warm, eager answer. "I wish he could be here always."

Ah, Isaac St. John, why that inward glow of satisfaction at the words? Are you so little skilled in the signs of *love* as not to read them more correctly? Don't you know that if there were any

love, of the sort you have been hoping, in that fair girl's heart, she would go by the rules of contrary, and protest that it was a matter of perfect indifference to her whether Mr. Frederick came or not? There is no blush on her cheek; there is no faltering in her tone: why should you deceive yourself?

The surmise was correct: Frederick St. John had come down by the morning's express train. You may see him as he walks out of the station at Lexington: it is that tall, slender, aristocratic man, with dark hair, pale refined features, and eyes of the deepest blue. The people at the station touch their hats to him and smile a greeting, and he smiles and nods at them in return, kindly, genially, as if he really thanked them for their welcome. There was neither heartlessness nor hypocrisy in Frederick St. John: he was a true gentleman at heart.

"Would you like a fly, sir? I don't see any carriage come down for you."

"No, thank you, Williams. I prefer walking such a day as this. Is Mr. St. John well, do you happen to know?"

"As well as usual, I think, sir," was the man's reply, who drove his own fly. "He walked





book with her when she went out to sketch. It might come to the same, so far as her working went, she would answer in her independence: if she did not read, she might only lie and dream. But the dean was not at the rectory just now: only his wife, daughter, and niece. This young lady's home had been with them since the death of her mother, the Lady Sarah Beauclerc: her father was in India.

The soft bloom mantled in Sarah Beauclerc's cheeks when she saw who had turned the sharp corner and was upon her. His appearance took her by surprise: neither she nor any one else had known that he was coming. She put down her book and was about to rise: but he laid his hand upon her and sat down on the bench beside her. He kept her hand in his; he saw the blushes on her cheeks; and that her eyes fell beneath the gaze of his own.

But the liking between them was not destined to go on to love: though indeed on her part, and perhaps also on his, the feeling had been very like love once. In her behaviour to him she had been a finished coquette: *he* set it down to caprice, to a want of real affection for him; in reality it grew out of her love. She believed

that, come what would, he was to marry Lady Anne St. John ; she believed that he accepted the destiny, though he might not be unwilling to amuse himself before he entered on it : and, one moment she had been gentle, tender, yielding, in obedience to her secret love ; the next she would be cold, repelling, the very essence of scorn. This had partially worked his cure : but in a meeting like the present, coming suddenly upon her in all her beauty, the old feelings would rise again in his heart. Ah ! how different might things have been in this life for one other woman, had Sarah Beauclerc but known the real state of affairs between him and Lady Anne !

But she still retained enough of the past feelings to be confused—confused in manner as in mind. She put questions as to his unexpected appearance, not hearing one syllable of the answers ; and Frederick St. John detected the secret joy, and his voice grew more low and tender as he bent over her, and a smile, than which earth could possess nothing sweeter, sat on his lips. Perhaps even now, had he remained at Castle Wafer—but where's the use of speculating upon what might have been ?

“ I think you are glad to see me, Sarah.”

One flash of answering avowal, and then the lovely consciousness on the face faded, the light of love died out of it; it grew hard, satirical, half angry. That she should so have betrayed herself! She raised her head with a slight jerk, and looked out straight before her from the depths of her cold light-blue eyes.

"We are glad to see any one in this lonely desert, where the only gentleman of degree is Mr. St. John. Not but that I would rather see him than many others. Did you leave London this morning?"

Frederick St. John dropped the hand and rose.

"I shall never understand you, Sarah. Yes, I left it this morning. Where's Georgina? She will be glad to welcome me if you are not."

"There's one will be glad to welcome you at Castle Wafer," she rejoined, laughing now, but the laugh sounded cold and cheerless. "Lady Anne has been wishing for you for some time."

"Yes, I think she has. I must go on now. I shall see you again, no doubt, by and by."

He hastened on his way, utterly unconscious that a pair of great eyes, more lovely than those he had been gazing on, were behind the grove of

trees beyond, had been witnesses to the interview—not intentionally. Georgina Beauclerc had been strolling about when she saw his approach through the trees. She was the Dean's daughter—a lithe, active girl of middle height, with a pleasing, piquant, rather saucy face, these wide-open, grey blue eyes, light-brown hair, and a healthy blood mantling under the sun-burnt skin of the dimpled cheeks—a daring, wild, independent young lady, but one all truth and ingenuousness; and that is saying a very great deal in these days of most detestable artificialism. Georgina had no end of faults, but Dr. Beauclerc knew her heart, and he would not have exchanged his daughter for any girl in the world.

She, Georgina Beauclerc, had looked on from between the trees, all her veins throbbing, her pulses beating. A stronger, a purer, a more enduring love never made glad the heart of woman, than this one that filled Georgina Beauclerc's for Frederick St. John. To hear his step was rapture; to touch his hand was as a ray of that unforgiven fire filched for us from heaven; to see him thus unexpectedly was as if the whole earth had become suddenly flooded with a shining light of rose colour. But, even as she watched

that other meeting with her cousin, the sharp pain—often enough found there before—seized upon her heart, the loving light faded from her face, and her lips paled with anguish. Of keen, discerning faculties, *she* had seen all along that it was not from Lady Anne there was danger to be feared, but from Sarah herself. A faint, low cry, as of a bird in pain, escaped her as she watched the meeting, and drank in its signs.

Did anything in the world ever run so tortuous as *this* course of love?—if you can call it a course at all, that is so vague and undefined. Everybody—uncles, aunts, guardians—wanted Frederick St. John to wed Lady Anne. Frederick did not want to marry her at all; did not intend to marry her; and she, on her part, hoped to marry somebody else. But that was a secret not convenient yet to breathe to the world; Frederick alone shared it; and if things came to a crisis he intended to take on himself the whole onus of declining the match, so as to spare Anne. They understood each other perfectly; and that is more than can be said for any other two actors of our story. Nothing so very tortuous there, you will say; but look a little further. Georgina loved Frederick St. John

with her whole heart; and he never cast a thought to her. He must have known of her love; there had been things to tell it him—trifles in the past; but he passed her by, and felt all too inclined to give his love to her cousin. She, Sarah, could have made him her heart's resting-place, ah! how willingly! but her head was filled ever with Lady Anne, and she met his incipient love with scorn. It was curing him, as I have told you; but if the whole truth could have been laid bare, the lives of some of them had been widely different.

Georgina was obliged to come forth from her hiding-place, for his path lay through the ornamental shrubbery-grove, and he must have seen her. Her colour went and came fitfully as she held out her hand; her bosom heaved underneath the thin summer dress, a flowing robe of muslin, tied with blue ribbons. Her large straw hat was hanging by its blue ribbons from her arm; and she began to talk freely and wildly—anything to cover her agitation. Their intercourse was familiar as that of brother and sister, for they had been intimate since childhood.

“Well, Georgie! In the wars as usual, I see, amidst the brambles.”

He pointed to her robe, and she caught it up; a long bramble was trailing to it.

"It is your fault, sir. Hearing a strange voice, I pushed through the thorns to see who might be the intruder. What a strange, flighty way you have got into! Coming down by fits and starts, when nobody expects you! We heard you were off to Finland, or some of those agreeable spots. You'll frighten Castle Wafer into fits."

"Wrong, young lady. Castle Wafer sent for me."

"That's one of your stories," politely returned Georgina. "I was at Castle Wafer after breakfast this morning, and Mrs. St. John was regretting that you did not come down this autumn; some one else also, I think, though she did not say it."

He looked down at her as she spoke. There were times when he thought she divined the truth as regarded himself and Lady Anne St. John.

"I wonder," she continued, "that you have kept away so long."

"How is the dean?"

"He is not here—only mamma. Tell me; what has brought you down?"



"I did tell you. I was sent for."

"By——"

"Isaac. You are as curious as ever, Georgina. But now, can you tell me *why* I am sent for; for that is a puzzle to me. I fear——"

He stopped suddenly. Miss Beutclerc raised her eyes to his face. There was a shade of uneasiness in his tones, as if he were ill at ease.

"I know nothing about it," she answered, earnestly. "I did not even know you were sent for. I would be sure to tell you if I did."

He nodded an acknowledgment, courteously enough, but very abstractedly, as if he thought little of Georgina or of anything she could tell him, and walked on alone, never once looking back. She leaned her forehead against a tree, and gazed after him; her wild love shining forth in her yearning blue eyes; her whole heart longing to call after him ere he should be quite beyond view, and the day's sunshine have gone out in darkness, "Oh stay with me, my love! stay with me!"

He went on to the house, straight into the presence of Isaac, who was then back in his own room, and learnt why he had been summoned. That his embarrassments would, of necessity, be-

come known to his brother some time, he had entertained no shadow of doubt; but he was one of those high-bred, honourable men who look upon debt as little less than crime; and now that the moment had come, it brought him terrible mortification.

"I have no excuse to offer," he said. "But do not think worse of me than you can help. Not one shilling of it has gone in dishonour."

That he spoke the truth Isaac knew, and his heart went out to him—him whom he had ever loved as a son.

"I will set you straight, only be more cautious in future," he said, never speaking, in his generosity, one word of reproach. "And, Frederick, this had better be kept from your mother. It would pain her, and perhaps alarm Anne. Don't you think it is time you married? There's nothing to wait for. I'm sure—I fancy at least—that Anne is ready."

And Frederick St. John, bound by a promise to Lady Anne, did not speak out openly in contradiction, as he might have done, but evaded the question.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### MR. FREDERICK ST. JOHN CAME TO GRIEF.

IN a long, low room at the rectory, its windows opening to the grass, on the morning but one subsequent to this, sat Sarah Beauclerc, practising a piece of difficult music. Idly inclined though she was, practising was a thing she never neglected. Whatsoever gifts tended to set her off to advantage, whether natural ones or acquired, were sedulously cultivated, for Sarah Beauclerc had very much of the coquette in her nature. She and her cousin were contrasts. The one, cold, calm, calculating, did things by rule; the other did all by impulse, and could not be cold if she tried. Sarah was the least in the world artificial; Georgina was too natural.

Mrs. Beauclerc, thin and discontented-looking as of yore, with the red tip of her nose growing

redder year by year, sat at the French window of the room, talking to Georgina. Georgina, in a clear pink muslin dress, with open lace sleeves on her pretty wrists, stood just outside the window. She was partly listening to her mother,—as much as she ever did listen to Mrs. Beauclerc's grumblings,—partly humming to herself the notes that Sarah was playing, as her eyes wandered wistfully, far far out in the distance, seeking for one who did not come.

"What are you looking at?" Mrs. Beauclerc suddenly asked in a sharp tone. "You never pay attention to me, Georgina."

"I thought—I thought—" and though the answer was given with hesitation, she spoke the straightforward truth—"I thought I saw Frederick St. John. Some one was there, but he has turned away now, whoever it was."

"By the way, talking of Frederick St. John," resumed Mrs. Beauclerc, forgetting her former subject in the fresh one, a frequent habit of hers, "I wonder whether his arrival will make any difference to this evening? Mrs. St. John and Anne promised to come in and dine with us, *sans cérémonie*; I suppose they will come."

"Shall I go and ask?" said Georgina.

“ If you like. Yes.”

She stepped gaily over the threshold into the room, all her inertness gone. The short secluded walk through the private grounds would be charming enough on that warm autumn day ; but had it been one of stones and brambles, Georgina had deemed it Eden, with the prospect of *his* presence at the end. She halted for a moment to put a question ; to put it indifferently, as if it were of no moment whatever to her, and she tossed her handkerchief carelessly about as she spoke it.

“ Is Frederick to come with them ? ”

“ Dear me, Georgina ! *Is* he to come ! He can come if he likes.”

Buried in her occupation, Sarah Beauclerc had heard nothing of this. When next her cousin entered the room her bonnet was on, and Mrs. Beauclerc had left it.

“ Where’s mamma ? ” asked Georgina.

Sarah rose from her stool. “ My aunt went out on the lawn, I think. Where are you going ? ”

“ Up to Castle Wafer. Will you come ? ”

The light of assent, all too eager, shone for a moment in Sarah’s eyes ; but she recollected her resolution—to *forget*—and declined.

"Not this morning."

"Very well," said Georgina. "Don't say I didn't ask you. You said so once before, if you remember, Sarah, and a great passion you were in."

Sarah Beauclerc's lip curled. "I don't think I ever was in a passion in my life. It is only the uncontrolled, the ill-regulated, who so forget themselves."

"I would rather go into a good hearty passion and get it over, than be cold as an icicle. What a passion I once put Fred St. John in!" added Georgina, half losing herself in the remembrance. "*He* can be passionate, if you like!"

"I don't believe it."

"*Dis*-believe it, then," equably returned Georgina. "I have seen him in more rages than one. It's not a thing to forget, I can tell you. He is sweet-tempered in ordinary life; ay, very, but on rare occasions he can be roused. Ask Mrs. St. John; ask Anne."

She stepped out from the window, and continued her way, nodding to Mrs. Beauclerc, who was at a distance bending over her favourite flower-bed. As Georgina got fairly into the grounds of Castle Wafer, she looked on all sides,

lest haply her eyes might light on what they would so much have liked to see. That it was Frederick St. John out half-an-hour before, she assumed as a matter of certainty; but nearly all she had seen of him was the top of his hat.

Suddenly a butterfly crossed her path; she was then getting near to Castle Wafer. It was one of those beautiful insects so very rare, its wings purple and gold; and Georgina, no better than a butterfly herself and variable as one, began to give it chase; when in turning suddenly the corner of the hedge of variegated evergreens, she came close upon a man, a stranger.

Springing back as one startled, her heart beat a shade quicker. Not that there was anything particular to startle her, except that he was a stranger, and that he stood in a stealthy attitude. He wore a rather remarkable hat, inasmuch as that its crown was higher than those of ordinary hats and went tapering off towards the top in a sugar-loaf fashion, his clothes were shabby-genteel; and altogether he put Georgina in mind of the portrait of Mephistophiles, as represented on the cover of one of her pieces of music, taken from Faust.

He had been bending forward, peering through

the trees at Castle Wafer; the position he held commanded the full view of the front of the house. But he appeared equally startled with Miss Beauclerc, at being interrupted, glided away sideways, and was lost to view.

"What a strange-looking man!" exclaimed Georgina. "And what was he doing there? Perhaps wanting to take a photograph of Castle Wafer! *That* tall hat must have been the one I saw from our house."

She emerged from the shaded path, crossed the lawn, stepped over the terrace, and into the drawing-room. The families were too intimate to stand on any sort of ceremony, and as frequently entered each others' houses in this fashion as by the more formal door. The room was empty, but almost immediately Frederick St. John came into it.

His eye fell upon her for a moment only, and she caught the half-wistful, half-eager glance that went roaming around in search of another.

"Are you alone?" he asked, as he shook hands with her.

"Sarah is not with me," was the petulant answer. It was utterly impossible to Georgina



in his hand : Georgina's quick thought wondered whether it was the beautiful butterfly of purple and gold. Suddenly, in this same moment, as she looked, she saw the strange man go rather swiftly up to him and touch him on the shoulder.

She saw Frederick St. John wheel round ; she saw him fling the man's arm off with a haughty gesture. And after a few minutes' parley, during which the man showed him a paper—minutes of hesitation as it seemed, for Mr. St. John looked about him like a man uncertain of his course—they finally walked away together. Georgina went home wondering.

Mrs. St. John and Lady Anne came in about four o'clock, bringing their work. Lady Anne was making a collection of ferns, and she began doing something to a dried leaf with water and a sponge. Mrs. St. John and Mrs. Beauclerc were each knitting a soft wool counterpane of divers colours, and began comparing progress.

"Where's Frederick?" asked Mrs. Beauclerc.  
"Is he not coming?"

"I don't know where he is," cried Mrs. St. John, in a quick tone and looking up, as though the question recalled something to her recollection. "We have seen nothing of him since the

morning, and just now I got a pencilled note from him, saying he might not be in until to-night, or perhaps not at all, if he found his business detained him very late."

"Has he gone to Lexington?"

"We don't know where he's gone. But it is very strange he should go out to stop, without mentioning it to me. The note was not dated from any place, and the servants said a strange boy brought it. So very thoughtless of Frederick, to go out in this flighty manner! Anne was dreaming of him this afternoon."

"Dreaming of him!" repeated Mrs. Beauclerc.

Lady Anne laughed. "Mrs. St. John insisted at the time that I was dreaming," she said. "We drove out in the pony-carriage after luncheon, and on passing the Barley Mow, I could have declared I saw Frederick at one of the upper windows. But when we came closer he had turned into a strange man in a tall hat. I suppose I must have been thinking of him, and so fancied it: or else the sun, which was full in my face, caused the delusion. Georgina, what is the matter?"

It was time to ask. Georgina Beauclerc was

standing as one transfixed; her eyes staring, her mouth half-open. She was as clever a girl at putting two and two together as could well be; and the whole mystery seemed to have suddenly cleared itself. Very rapidly she drew her conclusions: that Frederick St. John had been arrested for debt, and the man was keeping him prisoner at the Barley-Mow!

A mist gathered before her sight: her heart sunk within her. Georgina had long known he was in some temporary embarrassment; it came to her knowledge through an incautious word of his own; and she had cherished the knowledge as a secret link between them. But she had not suspected *this*, and it came upon her with a crushing kind of fear.

She burst out laughing, for the question of Lady Anne recalled her to herself, making some evasive plausible excuse. She would have died rather than betray him.

"I know," she said. "He is gone over to Lexington to avoid dining with so many women. You could not expect him to stay for us, Mrs. St. John."

"Very true, my dear; the same thought had occurred to me," was the satisfied answer.

"But I don't see why he should hint at not coming home to sleep."

"There may be a thousand things to detain him," said Georgina, throwing back her pretty head, as if to cool the hot fever crimsoning her cheeks. "And who knows but he may have gone on to Sir John Ingram's? I made him so mad one day last year, teasing him about that gawky Jane Ingram! Mamma nearly boxed my ears for it."

"Would you mind holding this edge of the leaf for me, Georgina," asked Lady Anne. "It will not keep you a minute."

"And now that we are settled, would *you* mind playing for us, Sarah?" interposed Mrs. St. John. "I have not had that charming new movement of Benedict's out of my brain since I heard you play it when we were here last."

Sarah Beauclerc went to the piano and began the piece. Georgina watched the group for a little while; good unsuspecting souls, all; and then she quitted the room.

Snatching her garden hat and mantle from the place where they were hung—for Mrs. Beauclerc insisted on such things being at hand, though she rarely succeeded in getting them worn—Georgina

flung them on and went out, taking a path that would not bring her in view of the drawing-room window. Where was she going, this wild, thoughtless girl? Need you ask? In her impulsive, free, careless fashion, she was hastening to the Barley Mow, to see Frederick St. John.

It sounds very bad, no doubt, to the reader's ears. The name of the "Barley Mow" itself would be enough to frighten modest people, without the gentleman. But in this quiet little spot, the Barley Mow was as sedate and respectable a house to enter as any private one; and Georgina had many a time gone into it with Dr. Beauchere to sit ten minutes with one of its daughters, who had been an invalid for years, and was now dying.

She went flying on at the pace of a steam-engine, and gained the door in about three minutes. The landlord, a respectable simple old yeoman, in a yellow waistcoat and top-boots, who was a farmer as well as an innkeeper, met her at the entrance.

"Mary ain't quite so well, miss," he began, more hastily than he was in the habit of speaking. "She's lying down. I'm afeard I can't ask you to go up this afternoon."

"I have not come to see her," returned Georgina, ignoring ceremony. "Is Mr. Frederick St. John here?"

The man seemed taken aback. He might not admit it; he could not conscientiously deny it; and he only stared by way of answer.

"I know he is here," said Georgina. "You need not hesitate."

"Well, miss, he is here, and that's the truth. But I mightn't say it."

"I want to see him," she continued, walking into the private parlour of the family, vacant then. "Ask him to come to me."

It appeared that he could not come without his attendant in the hat, for when Mr. St. John, who came down-stairs immediately, entered the room, that gentleman's hat and head appeared over his shoulder. Very haughtily Mr. St. John waved him off, and closed the door to shut him out.

"Georgina, whatever brings you here?"

"How did it happen?" she asked eagerly. "Are you really arrested?"

"Really and truly," he said, speaking in a tone of hauteur that perhaps veiled a feeling of bitter mortification. "The marvel does not lie in that but in how you came to know of it."

"I guessed it," said Georgina.

"*Guessed it!*"

She quietly told him the whole from the beginning: her meeting with the man in the morning, the news Mrs. St. John brought about the note, the fancied view of Lady Anne.

"The truth seemed to come over me in a moment," she concluded. "I knew you were arrested; I was sure it was nothing else. And I came out of the room without saying anything, and ran all the way here."

"But what have you come here for, Georgina?"

"To see you. To ask if I can do anything for you," she simply said. "I saw by the note that you dare not tell Mrs. St. John."

"Dare is not quite the word, Georgina. If I can spare her I will, for I know it would grieve her cruelly. The affair would not have been the trouble of a quarter of an hour, but for Isaac's being away. Things always do happen by contraries."

"You think he would—he would—what could he have done?" she asked, her anxious face and its earnest eyes turned up towards him.

"He would have paid the claim and set me free. As it is, nothing can be done until he comes home to-morrow."

"How much is the claim?"

Mr. St. John drew in his lips. "It is amidst the hundreds. Nay, how scared you look!"

"But he will never have so much as that by him!" exclaimed Georgina.

Mr. St. John smiled. "No, Georgie; but the signature of Mr. St. John of Castle Wafer will be as valuable to the man who holds me here as money. He knows that, or he would not let me stop. It was a clever trick, their sending down here after me."

"Who is he?" asked Georgina, lowering her voice, with an instinctive conviction that the individual in question was rather close to the outside of the door.

"He's nobody," was the reply. "But, nevertheless, he is master of me just now, by virtue of the law. He considers himself a model of consideration and benevolence, and will expect me substantially to acknowledge it: otherwise he would have taken me off pretty quickly."

"Where to?"

"To—it is an ugly word, Georgina—prison."

"Oh! But you will stop that, won't you?"

"Isaac will. The annoying part of the business is, that he should be away just this day of all



others. It is rather singular, too, considering that he's at home from year's end to year's end. There's no help for it, however, and here I must stop until he does return, hiding myself like a mouse, lest I should be seen, and the news carried to my mother."

"Can't I help you?—can't I do anything for you?"

"Thank you always, Georgina. You are a good little girl, after all. No, nothing."

She pouted her pretty lips.

"Except keep the secret. And go home again as soon as possible: what would your mamma say if she knew you had come?"

"Scold me for a week. Will Mr. St. John be home early to-morrow?"

"I wish I knew. Any time, I suppose, from midday up to night. We must set somebody to watch for him: he is posting, and therefore goes and comes the upper road, not passing here. I dare not send a note to Castle Wafer to await his arrival, for my mother, seeing my handwriting, would inevitably open it; neither can I entrust the matter to any of the servants to tell their master: they might make a mystery of it, and so bring it that way to the ears of my mother.

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Besides, to tell the truth, I don't care that the servants should know it. Brumm would be the only safe one, and he is with his master."

"Entrust it to me," said Georgina, eagerly. "Let me manage it for you. I will take care to tell Mr. St. John the moment of his arrival. If I can't get to see him, I'll tell Brumm."

Mr. St. John paused a minute. The proposal certainly solved a difficulty.

"But I don't like you to do this, Georgina," he said, following out his thoughts.

"I *will* do it," she answered, the colour mantling in her cheeks. "You can't prevent me now."

He smiled at her eagerness; he saw how pleasant it was to her to serve him. She laid her hand on the door to depart.

"Be it so, Georgina. I shall call you henceforth my friend in need."

She opened the door quickly. On the opposite side of the narrow passage, his back propped against the wall, his eyes thrown straight upon them, a cautious sentinel, stood the man. Mr. St. John saw him, closed his lips on what he was about to say, and motioned her into the room again.

"You will not speak of this misfortune, Georgina, at your own house? Is it known there?" he continued, a sudden fear detectable in his voice. "Does Sarah know of it?"

"And if she did," retorted Georgina, the old ache seizing again upon her heart, "she does not know of it from me."

Flinging back the door again, she went straight out of the house, running all the way home lest she should be missed, her brain busy with the one thought.

"Sarah, Sarah! It is all he cares for in this life!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE FAIR AT ALNWICK.

IN the village of Alnwick, a passenger going down the long, straggling street might observe at any time a break in the houses on the left-hand side. This was filled up by the common, or waste land; it belonged to the lord of the manor, and nobody might build upon it. It was a wide, untidy piece of ground, branching off far away into corners and dells, which did very well to harbour trampers and gipsies. Once a year, for three days in the month of September, this common was delivered over to all the bustle and confusion of a fair. Show-booths, containing (if you believed them) all the wonders of the world, alive and dead; caravans; drinking-tents; stalls for fruit, gingerbread, penny trumpets; and shoals of pleasure-seekers, reigned in triumph during those three days. Sober shopkeepers, driven

half-wild with the opposition drums and horns ever going, talked a great deal about "getting the nuisance done away with;" but the populace generally believed that no living man could put any such threat into execution, save and except the lord of the manor: and *he* could only do it by denying the use of the ground. However that may have been, the ground had not been denied yet, and the populace was triumphant.

It was a bright September day, and the fair was in the full swing of its glory: that is, consistent with the quiet respectability of the first day. Things on that day were ordered with a due regard to decorum: the music was kept within bounds in the matter of loudness, the bawling of the showmen had a trace of persuasion in it, the ladies' dresses and dancing were genteel. For on this first day the good families around would send their children (some had been known to go themselves), and ladies'-maids and butlers congregated there. The second and third days were given over to what these domestics called the riff-raff.

The fair was in its full and radiant glory on this fine September day; drums were beating, fifes were playing, pantaloons were shouting,

ladies were dancing, and rival showmen in scarlet and gold tunics were shouting out their opposition seductive attractions, all in chorus, when two respectable-looking maid-servants, each in charge of a little boy, might have been observed in the street, about to enter the place of enchantment. The children were attired in black velvet, trimmed with crape, and their straw hats had black ribbon round them. The younger, a lovely child with a bright complexion and a mass of fair curls, looked to be nearly three years old ; the other was nearly five, not a pretty child, but his countenance one of noble intelligence. An insignificant little fellow enough in years and stature, the elder one ; nobody to look at : and yet a great many people touched their hats to him, child though he was, and that very fair was being held upon his own land ; for he was the lord of the manor, the inheritor of Alnwick.

Benja and George had been wild to get off to it. Indeed, for a week beforehand, from the first raising of the first plank for the booths, it could hardly be said that either servants or children for miles round were in their sedate senses. Prance, however, was an exception. Prance seemed to have no affinity for fairs ; and she had drawn in

her thin lips in withering contempt at Honour's open longing for it. There was no more cordiality between the two servants than there used to be, and a sharp passage of tongue would occur now and again, in which Honour, so far as words went, got the best of it. Honour had a free tongue, and there was no denying it. This fair had caused a desperate quarrel that same morning: Honour saying everything she could to enhance its anticipated glories to the children; Prance contradicting every word, and protesting it was not a fit place to take them to. Mrs. Carleton St. John favoured Honour in the matter, told Prance she'd not deprive the children of seeing the shows for anything, and finally ordered her to hold her tongue. George took his nurse's part—not, however, to the length of being indifferent to the fair, only as an outlet for some rather demonstrative partizanship and a good deal of temper—and said Honour was a "nasty beast." Benja retaliated that Prance was, and George struck him. Mrs. Carleton St. John for once reproved George, and kissed and soothed Benja. It was a curious thing, not noticed at the time, but recalled by Honour in the future, that this little graciousness on the part of her mistress, this display of affec-

tion for Benja, should have occurred on the morning of the day afterwards characterised by the unexpected visit of Mr. Isaac St. John. "As if it had been on purpose!" Honour was wont to repeat to herself with a bitter groan. However, all this partizanship for herself and Benja only put her into a good humour at the time; she could not see the future; and when they started after an early dinner, Honour was in a state of delight, satisfied with everybody.

Except, perhaps, with Prance. Prance showed no signs whatever of her discomfiture, but followed on to the fair, with George, impassive and silent as ever. As they were turning into the bustle, and the two pair of little legs already began to dance to the said drums, and the charmed eyes caught the first glimpse of the spangles and all the other enchantments, a dusty travelling carriage-and-four came bowling down the street, and stopped at the Bell Inn, which was situated right opposite to the common. Travelling carriages-and-four had become sufficiently rare to be a sort of curiosity in the county, and both the maids turned to stare at it, utterly unsuspecting that it contained one who, as guardian, had all power over the heir of Alnwick.



The first show they entered (on the principle of keeping the best until last), was a very sober sort of affair, the entrance consisting of a green-baize sheet, with the corner pinned up. It purported to be, as the black letters painted on a white calico flag intimated, "An Emporium of Foreign Curiosities." Various articles were portrayed on a red curtain stretched across underneath the letters; but whether the artist had been somewhat inaccurate in his designs, or that the foreign curiosities were wholly unknown to native eyes, was uncertain. The admission price was threepence, the trumpet loud, and the showman magnificent both in person and persuasion.

"I shall go into this," said Honour. "I should think *you* needn't be afraid of what you'd see inside this," she added to Prance in a tone, as must be confessed, of aggravation. "There's no dancing here."

Prance's only answer was to draw down the corners of her thin lips and walk off with George to a leviathan booth whose company were executing a complicated quadrille in front. Honour paid her threepence, haggled with the money-taker about admitting Benja for three-halfpence, that functionary protesting that there was no

half-price for gentlemen's children, and went into the show.

Like unto a great many other shows, its inside did not realize the promise of its out. There was a crocodile in stone, and a few more dead wonders, which Honour turned up her nose at, saying something about demanding back her money: but Benja's attention had become riveted by a pretty model of a steepled church rising from the midst of green moss. It was white, and its coloured transparent windows were ingeniously shown by means of a light placed inside it; it really was a pretty and conspicuous article in the dark booth, and Benja could not be torn from it. How little did Honour think that that sight was to exercise so miserable an influence on the unconscious child!

"Come along," she said, rather impatiently. "I could make you as good a one any day, Benja."

"How could you make it?" promptly asked Benja.

"With white paper and some thin strips of wood for the frame Master Benja, then! We shall have Prance going home and telling your mamma that we lost her for the purpose. She's as deceitful as yonder crocodile."

"Couldn't you buy it for me, Honour?" returned Benja, not stirring a peg.

"Of course I couldn't," answered Honour. "What a little simpleton you must be, to ask it! The things here are not for sale; the folks get their living by showing them. And a fine set of worthless rubbish it all is! Once for all, are you coming, Master Benja?"

"Will you promise to make me one?" persisted Benja.

"Yes, I will. There!"

"When?"

"As soon as I can get the things. Now come."

Benja reluctantly took his legs away; but his head and eyes were turned for the last glance, up to the moment when Honour pulled him through the low green-baize opening.

Meanwhile Mrs. Carleton St. John was sitting alone. She was of remarkably quiet habits by inclination, a great stay-at-home, rarely seeking society or amusement abroad; and the still recent death of her husband tended to keep the Hall pretty free from idle visitors. One sole passion seemed to absorb her whole life, to the exclusion of every other; it filled every crevice of her heart,

it regulated her movements, it buried even her natural grief for her husband—and this was the love of her child. The word love is most inadequate to express the feeling: it was as a fiery passion, threatening to consume every healthy impulse. She was quite aware of it: indeed her conscience did not allow her to be otherwise.

One thought was ever present to her; it may be said that it had never been out of her mind since the day her husband died: that Benja was the chief of Alnwick Hall, with all its wealth and dignity; that she, *she*, Charlotte Carleton, so arrogant by nature, was only there on sufferance, a home accorded in it to her as his personal guardian; and that George was as nobody. They were like a sharp thorn, these reflections, ever piercing her; they ate into her ill-regulated heart and rankled there. And they went on a step to another thought, an unwholesome thought, which would have been a wicked thought but that she did not call it up of her own will; one that carried danger in its train. In the first waking of the early morning, in the fevered dreams of the midnight solitude, in the broad glare and bustle of noon-day, it was ever thrusting itself forward

—if Benja were to die, her child would be the inheritor.

Was she aware of its danger? No. And yet she was fond of tracing it back to its first source—the accident to Benja. When the boy was pulled out of the water, drowned as was supposed, and as some one called out, the wild beating of Mrs. St. John's bosom — *not with sorrow* — called into life the thought that had certainly never existed there before, or else had lain dormant.

Her increasing dislike of Benja should have acted as a warning. It was generated by the false view she took of the state of things: that Benja was a sort of ogre whose sole mission on earth was to stand in the light of her child and deprive him of what might have been his birth-right. She strove against this dislike—it might be better to call it hatred, for that's what it had grown into—and she had to exercise a perpetual check upon herself in her behaviour to him. None but she knew what it cost her to treat Benja with a semblance of love, or to make no very apparent difference between the children. She did strive against it—let us do her justice!—not from any suspicion of danger, but from her

own sense of equity. That very morning, in taking Benja's part and kissing him, she had been acting from an impulse of principle, an endeavour to do right. But no sooner were the children out of her sight, than the old bad feelings got the better of her, and she sat indulging all sorts of foolish dreams and visions of what she would do were Alnwick Georgy's instead of Benja's. Will you believe that she had got into the habit of repeating over to herself their Christian names, with the prospective title before them? "Sir Benjamin St. John," "Sir George St. John;" and she thought the one (you need not ask which) sounded a thousand times more euphonious than the other.

Very conscious though she was of all this, she yet detected no danger. The night of her husband's death, she made a resolve to do her part in all duty by her little step-son; and when the codicil to the will was read, giving Mr. St. John of Castle Wafer the power to remove him from her, she resented it bitterly as a mark of want of confidence in her by her husband. No woman could have been more willing in intention to do right by a step-son than was Charlotte Carleton St. John: if but her strength of good will did

not fail her, she might do it. One result of the desire to carry out her good resolve, was the retaining of Honour in her service. She very much disliked the girl, from her strong attachment to Benja in contradistinction to George, and her always taking his part against that rather capricious younger gentleman; but she would not discharge her. To this wish to continue in her duty, rather than because her husband in dying had expressed a wish that Honour should be retained about Benja, was owing the fact that the girl was still in her place. Honour alone of the servants, save and except perhaps Prance, had detected all along the second Mrs. St. John's dislike to her little charge; she was aware, as surely as though she had read it in a book, that her mistress regarded George as he who ought to be the heir, Benja as a usurper; and it aroused within her a resentful feeling of indignation, which sometimes peeped out in her manner. Not sufficiently so for Mrs. St. John to find open fault with; and she only thought the girl had a quick temper. And now I think I have said as much as I can say about the state of mind of Mrs. Carleton St. John. She deliberately intended to do right: but passions and prejudices are stron ;

unusually strong they were in her ; and her mind was ill-regulated.

As she sat this day, the approach of a vehicle of some sort in the avenue attracted her attention. She soon saw it was a fly from the Bell Inn, and all her motherly fears were at once up in arms, lest any accident had happened to Georgy, and he was being brought home in it, or she fetched to him. But it seemed to contain only one gentleman ; and he a stranger ; a delicate-looking man, who sat very low in the fly.

Not for a long while had she been so surprised as when the card was brought to her, and she found that her visitor was Mr. St. John of Castle Wafer. Had he come to remove Benja ? The thought awoke a momentary affection for the child in her heart, and called up a resentful flush to her cheeks. But the resentment faded away as Isaac came in, and held out his hand to her in his kindly open courtesy : she saw she had nothing underhanded to fear from him.

What was perhaps more agreeable to her, as it is to all vain women—and Charlotte St. John was one—was the look of honest admiration that shone out of Isaac's face and manner. She presented a picture deeply interesting—in her young



widowhood, in her beauty, in her manner so quiet and subdued. She burst into tears as they talked of her husband, of Benja; and she told Mr. St. John that if he removed Benja from her she should break her heart.

It was but a figure of speech. And it is very probable that the fact of two thousand a year of her income being in peril, may have swayed her to earnestness more than any other feeling. Mr. St. John took it all for loving earnestness, and assured her he thought no cause would be ever likely to arise for his removing Benja. In point of fact, Isaac St. John was most warmly impressed in her favour; it was almost as if she had fascinated him.

"Will you answer me a question?" asked Mrs. St. John; "I cannot get it solved by anyone else. Why did my husband leave this power in your hands? Did he doubt me?"

"I do not know why he left it," was the answer of Mr. St. John: "unless it was that you might be too kind to the boy—might indulge him to his detriment. I remember, too, his saying you were not very strong, and the charge of the two children might be a tax upon you."

She did not answer. She began to speak of

general things, and Isaac St. John sat talking with her for some time. She expressed her regret that Benja should happen to be at the fair, and laughed outright when Mr. St. John spoke of the noise that had assailed his ears from the drums. She pressed him to take up his quarters at the Hall until the morrow, but he declined; he was but an invalid at best, he said. He had engaged rooms at the Bell for himself and servant, and he invited Benja to come and breakfast with him on the following morning. Mrs. St. John assented readily.

"You will allow his nurse to attend him," he said to Mrs. St. John, as he rose to leave. "I should like to see and converse with the attendant of my little ward, and offer her a gratuity as an earnest of my favour."

As readily as the other request was this acceded to, and Mr. St. John departed, taking his final leave of his cousin's widow—for he intended to leave Alnwick soon after the morning's breakfast.

The fly had conveyed him almost through the park on his return to the Bell, when he saw two women-servants, in charge of two children. Rightly guessing who they were, he stopped the

fly, opened the door, and talked to them from his seat.

A noble boy, his ward, with an open, intelligent countenance; a pretty little toy-boy the other, with his bright face, his fair curls, and his indulged petulance of manner peeping out even then. The children were at home with him at once, showing him the fairings which they carried—one a child's kaleidoscope, the other a drum. Benja told him some unintelligible story of a "church" Honour was going to make for him; Georgy sounded the rataplan on his drum. He inquired of Honour whether she was the nurse spoken of to him by her late master, who had been with the child from his birth; upon her saying she was, he told her she was to be at the Bell with Master St. John the next morning at nine o'clock; he handed a sovereign to Prance; he won the boys' hearts by a promise of a whole cargo of fairings to be sent up that evening; and then he drove on. Not one of them had noticed his hump; but they thought what a little low gentleman he was in body.

Benja had taken home a fairing for his mamma—a blue-and-white smelling-bottle, flat as a half-crown, with a narrow neck in which was a little

cork as stopper. It had cost threepence, and he kissed her as he gave it her. George's fairing to his mamma had been a Banbury cake, but he had unfortunately eaten it on his way home. Whether the contrast touched her, or that with Mr. St. John in the vicinity she did not choose to be otherwise than a loving mother, certain it was, that she kissed Benja heartily in return, praised up his present as she put it into her waistband, and told Georgy he was a selfish little fellow. How gratified Honour was, and how, in manner, she crowed over Prance, Prance would not condescend to observe. Mrs. St. John was all graciousness, bade Honour have Master Benja very nice indeed for the following morning, and said the pony carriage should convey them down.

The appointment was kept. Benja was treated to jam and other goods things as he sat at breakfast with Mr. St. John — Brumm an Honour waiting on them. Afterwards, when the cloth was removed, Mr. Brumm had orders to take Master St. John to the fair and show him the elephant, or anything else Mr. Brumm might deem expedient; and Honour was requested to take a seat while Mr. St. John talked to her.

He really saw no means of ascertaining

whether Benja was well done by at the Hall, save this—the putting the question direct to the nurse. After what he had seen of the Hall's mistress the previous day, he would as soon suspect himself to be ill done by, as any child over whom she had control; still it was as well to make sure upon the point.

Honour answered his questions as straightforwardly as she could. But, it should be remarked upon, that in her new mood of graciousness towards her mistress (or it should perhaps rather be said of that lady's graciousness to her) she spoke more favourably of Mrs. St. John than she would have done at almost any previous time. She was not indulgent to Master Benja; but on the other hand she was not generally unkind to him, was the substance of her answer.

This rather surprised Mr. St. John. "I should have thought her in danger of being too kind," he said.

Honour shook her head. "Mrs. St. John is too kind by a great deal to her own child, sir; she indulges him dreadfully; but there's no fear that she will ever do that by Master Benja."

"I suppose you do not mean to say that she is unkind to him?" returned Mr. St. John,

rather at a loss how to frame his words with a due regard to what was due to the dignity of Mrs. St. John when speaking of her to her servant.

“Well, no, sir, I can’t say that she is unkind. She treats the two very much alike, only that she is always kissing and clasping the little one, and has him so much more with her. She boxed Master Benja’s ears the other day and made him cry. For no fault, either, that I could find out.”

Mr. St. John smiled. “A little wholesome correction is good for boys, you know.”

“I’m not saying that it isn’t, sir. Altogether, things have gone on much more comfortably since my master’s death than I used to fancy they would. There’s not much to complain of.”

“On the whole, then, you cannot tell me cause for any interference on my part? You see no reason why Master St. John should not remain at the Hall under his step-mother’s charge?”

“No, sir; I cannot say that I do. And of course I am always with him, and can take care of him there as well as I could anywhere else. I shall never let harm come anigh him from any one.”

It was conclusive, and Mr. St. John intimated that the conference was over.

"You see I speak to you as the confidential attendant of the child," he said; "you were named to me by your late master as one in whom every confidence might be placed. Do me the favour to regard what I have said as between ourselves, in the interest of this little orphan; and always remember, that in case of any emergency arising, where any—any counsel, or advice, or interference on my part should be desirable, a letter will find me at Castle Wafer. I shall come over from time to time—not often, for my health does not permit it; and I shall hope to have a letter from the little boy frequently."

He pressed a very handsome present into her hand as he concluded, saying it was in recompense of her trouble and attention to the child. Honour's eyes filled with tears as she took it; it needed not money to enhance her jealous love for Benja.

And the boy came back with Mr. Brumm in a state of ecstatic delight, for he had seen the elephant and everything else. He was despatched to the Hall with Honour, bearing kind compliments to its mistress, and a cargo of good things for himself and Georgy, and Mr. St. John set off on his homeward journey to Castle Wafer.

## CHAPTER XV.

### ONLY AS A BROTHER AND SISTER.

THE September afternoon was passing into the twilight of evening ere the master of Castle Wafer drew near his home. Miss Georgina Beauclerc was almost at her wits' end. Fully determined to carry out her promise of informing him of the mishap that had befallen his brother, she yet saw no means of doing it craftily, that is without its coming to the observance of Mrs. St. John, but by speaking to him in the moment that intervened between his stepping from his carriage and his entering the house. For this purpose had she been hovering about nearly ever since mid-day, keeping out of view of the windows, and ready to walk quietly forward as any ordinary visitor, as soon as the carriage came in sight. But the carriage did not come: and Georgina, conscious that the rectory dinner-hour



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St. John and his step-mother disappeared within doors together.

Excitement was rendering her ill. Have you realized what *an arrest* such as this must be to a young lady, shielded from the ways of the world? the threatening of a prison for one all too dear? It almost seemed like some dreadful calamity, some horrible degradation that Frederick St. John would not get over during life. Had his very existence depended upon it, she could not have been more eager, more determined to see, in some way, Mr. St. John.

As she stood there, crouching behind the dwarf ornamental shrubs of the lawn, and not very conspicuous in the evening twilight, Mr. Brumm came to this side of the carriage, opened the door, and began to take something from the seat. Miss Beauclerc darted up to him; she was by no means a squeamish young lady—rather too bold and free when the aim was right.

“Brumm,” she said, emotion lending a catching sound to her voice, “I want to see Mr. St. John. I must see him, and without any delay. If I go round by the other door and get into his parlour, will you contrive to send him to me? I daresay he is in the drawing-room with Mrs. St. John.”

For a minute or two Brumm only stared. He looked upon the dean's daughter, if the truth must be told, as a rather flighty young damsel ; and he did not believe she could want anything with Mr. St. John. That is to say, nothing of importance.

"My master is excessively fatigued, Miss Beauclerc," he said at length. "I fear he will not be able to see anyone to-night."

"Don't you be an idiot, Brumm," peremptorily retorted the young lady. "I tell you I *must* see him : the business is almost a matter of life or death. You get him to me in some way ; but take care you do it without any suspicion arising in Mrs. St. John.

She stole round the house as she spoke, on her way to Mr. St. John's own sitting-room—the pleasant room you have sometimes seen him in. Brumm, in doubt still, but seeing no remedy but to obey, collected the things from the carriage, handed them to a footman, and then went to the drawing-room.

His master was not seated, but standing. By this Brumm knew that he was not intending to remain in the room. Mrs. St. John was telling him of what she called Fred's mysterious conduct,

and showed him the note received on the previous day. She spoke in a complaining tone, and avowed her belief that her roving son had taken French leave to go back to London.

At any rate, there was nothing Mr. St. John could do in the matter; and in point of fact his fatigue of body was such he could not in any case have done much. Excessive bodily fatigue takes from the power of the mind; and he did not seem to attach much importance to what Mrs. St. John was saying. He went out of the room, carrying the note with him; and there he was arrested by Brumm.

"Will you be so kind, sir, as step to your sitting-room for an instant?"

"I am going up-stairs, Brumm. I have not felt so tired for years."

"But—I beg your pardon, sir," resumed Brumm, speaking in the low covert tone he had before used, and which a little surprised his master—"you—you are wanted there. If you will step this way, sir, I will explain."

Mr. St. John quitted the proximity of the drawing-room, which was evidently what Brumm wished. "Miss Beauclerc was waiting to speak to him," he whispered as he crossed the hall.

"She said she wanted to say a word to him in private."

"Miss Beauclerc!" Wondering very much, not perhaps at her wishing to speak to him, there was nothing extraordinary in that, but at the air of secrecy that Brumm seemed to invest the affair with, Mr. St. John went to his sitting-room. Georgina was pacing it something like a caged bird, hardly able to suppress her impatience.

"I have been outside waiting for you since twelve o'clock!" she exclaimed, totally ignoring all ceremonious greeting. "I thought you would never come!"

"Do you want me?" asked Mr. St. John.

"Do I want you! I never wanted anybody so much in my life. Has Mrs. St. John been telling you that Frederick has disappeared?"

"Yes. She thinks he has gone to London."

"What nonsense!" ejaculated Georgina, pushing her bonnet away from her flaming cheeks. "As if he would go off to London in that fashion! I have come to tell you about him, Mr. St. John. He had no one to trust, and so he trusted me; he could not send a letter to await you, lest Mrs. St. John should open it. He

is at the Barley-Mow all this time; he is a prisoner."

"He is a what!" exclaimed Mr. St. John.

"He was arrested yesterday morning. I saw it done, but I did not understand it then. It's a horrible man in a great high hat, and he has got him at the Barley-Mow, until you release him."

Isaac St. John sank down on a seat, in his pain—in his consternation. Living always completely out of the world, never having been brought into personal contact with its rubs and crosses, a thing of this nature was calculated to shock him in scarcely a less degree than it had shocked the young girl before him, who stood there looking at him with her large grey-blue eyes.

"Arrested!" he murmured. "Frederick!"

"You'll go and release him, won't you?" said Georgina. "It is a great deal of money; he told me it was amidst the hundreds; but you will pay it for him?"

"Yes, I will pay it," replied Mr. St. John, speaking abstractedly, as one lost in thought. "How came he to tell *you* about it, Georgina?"

"Oh, I went and saw him there; I guessed what had happened, there's no time to tell you

how, and I went. It was of no use his denying it to me then ; but I promised to keep his counsel. He is in a fever lest Mrs. St. John should get to know it."

Isaac St. John rose, opened the door, and called Brumm. Miss Beauclerc took the opportunity to slip away.

"I must run all the way home," she whispered. "Mamma must have missed me long ago. I shall tell her I waited up here to see you come home ; which is no story."

"You will keep the secret, my dear !" cried Mr. St. John, seizing her hand and speaking in an imploring accent. "It is a cruel disgrace for a St. John."

"Trust me ; trust me ever," was the earnest answer.

Little more than an hour later, Frederick St. John was sitting in that same room with his brother—a free man. He was disclosing to him the *whole* of his embarrassments, which he had not done previously. Not disclosing them altogether willingly, but of necessity ; for Mr. St. John's questionings were searching. The more Frederick told, the more amazed grew Isaac St. John ; it may be said the more utterly astounded

and angry. He had never himself been exposed to the many temptations that beset a young man of position in entering the world, and he judged them in by no means a tolerant spirit.

"Frederick, I could not have believed that any human being, gifted with reasoning faculties, could be guilty of such extravagance!"

"The money seems to have melted. I had no idea it was diminishing so fast."

"It has been recklessness, not simple extravagance."

Frederick St. John was seated at the table opposite his brother, one elbow leaning on it, the hand of the other playing with the seal attached to his watch-chain. The attitude, the voice, the bearing altogether, seemed to display a carelessness; and it vexed Mr. St. John.

"How has the money gone? Is it of any use my asking?"

"It would be of use if I could tell you," was the reply. "I declare, on my honour, that I do not know. As I say, the money seems to have melted. I was extravagant, I acknowledge that; I spent it thoughtlessly, heedlessly; and when once the downward path in money-spending



is entered upon, a man finds himself going along with a run, and can't pull up."

"Can't?" reproachingly echoed Mr. St. John.

"Well, Isaac, it is more difficult than you could imagine. I have found it so. And the worst is, you glide on so easily that you don't see its danger; otherwise one might sit down midway and count the cost. I wish you would not look so grieved."

"It is not the wilful waste of money that is grieving me," returned Isaac; "it is the—the thought that *you* should have suffered yourself to fall into these evil ways."

Frederick St. John raised his dark-blue earnest eyes to his brother. "Believe me, Isaac, a man can get out of money without running into absolute evil. I can with truth say that it has been my case. A very great portion of mine has gone in what you and my mother have been wont to call my hobby: buying pictures and running about after them. Wherever there was a gallery of paintings to be seen, I went after it, though it might be at the opposite end of the European world. I bought largely, thoughtlessly; never considering how I was to pay. I assisted a great many struggling artists, both English and foreign,

and set them on their legs. I always travelled—and you know how very much I have travelled—as if I were a wealthy man; and it's costly, that. But of evil, in your acceptation of those vices that constitute the word, I have not been guilty. Of extravagance, even, I have not been so guilty as you may think."

Mr. St. John lifted his eyebrows. "Not guilty of extravagance?"

"Isaac, I said not so guilty as you may deem me; not so guilty as appears on the surface. I fell into that dangerous practice of drawing bills. When I bought pictures and could not pay for them, I would give a bill for the amount. When the bill was due, if I could not meet it, I borrowed money upon another, and so patched up the deficiency in that way. It is that that has ruined me. If I owed a hundred pounds I had to pay two for it, sometimes three. Let a man once enter upon this system, and he won't be long above water."

"Did you never think of the ending?"

"Yes, often. But I could not pull myself up. There it is! Fairly entered on the downhill path, there's no getting back again. I can redeem myself in time, Isaac. If I choose to

give up all sources of expense, live upon a shilling a day, as the saying runs, things will right themselves."

"How long do you calculate you would be doing it?"

"Four or five years, I suppose."

"Just so. The best years of your life. I should not like to see it, Frederick."

"It might do me good."

"It would scarcely be a position for the heir of Castle Wafer."

"Isaac, believe me, I have never presumed upon that presumptive heirship; have never acted upon it. There have not been wanting insidious advisers urging me to forestal my possible right to its revenues, but I did not listen to them. Though I squandered my own property, I have not trenched on yours."

"Quite right," said Mr. St. John. "If anything in the world could make me wish to deprive you of that presumptive heirship, it would be the finding that you had presumed upon it for any such unjustifiable purposes. Though you are as much the heir-apparent to Castle Wafer, Frederick, as though you were my son, instead of younger brother, and I have assured you of this

before, it is well that the world should remember the doubt exists."

"I wish to remember it also, Isaac. It would be simple folly on my part not to do so. So long as you live, your intentions may be liable to change."

"Well now, listen to me. This matter has shocked me very greatly, but I see that it might have been worse; and if it has purchased for you that experience without which I conclude you worldly young men cannot do, I shall not think the cost dear. You must begin again upon a fresh footing. A totally different one. I will help you upon two conditions."

"What are they?"

"The first is, that you give me your word of honour never to set your name to another bill."

"I will give it with all my heart. It is only these embarrassments that have caused me to draw bills, and I had already made a firm resolution never to touch another, if once clear. I hate bills."

"Very well then, so far. The other condition is, that you marry."

For a minute Frederick St. John was silent. The avowal seemed to cause him no surprise; he

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"I am not going out this" was the woman's answer. "I have ever been too generous to Mr. Isaac Burr—and Frederick St. John caught fair—before I can say that I will marry. It is necessary to be made a wife."

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~~'Not in me,' is answered, smiling back~~

quietly. "It has not of course escaped my observation that you and my mother have had your wishes turned towards Anne: but—I—I have not encouraged this."

"It has been the universal wish of the St. John family that you and Anne should marry."

"I daresay it has. But the fact is, Isaac, I and Anne do not care for each other. As well perhaps avow it, now it has come to a point. Hitherto I have only evaded the question."

"Could you wish for a better wife than Anne?"

"I could not find a better in real worth. But we marry for love, not for worth: at least, worth goes for little when there's no love. My inclinations do not lie towards Anne."

Mr. St. John's face looked deathly pale as he leaned forward. The fatigue of the day was making itself acutely felt: and at these times crosses tell upon the heart.

"Do you know that her father wished it?" he said in a low tone. "He mentioned it to me more than once when he was dying—how glad he should be if he thought you would marry Anne. You were but a boy then; but you were a favourite with the earl."

"Nothing came out about Captain Saville?"

"Not a word. Be easy. Have I not told you you might trust me?"

Seeking the presence of his mother, he startled her by saying he was going up to London then, by a night train. In vain Mrs. St. John strove to combat his resolution, to ascertain particulars of the stormy interview just passed. Even as she was pressing for it, he kissed her, and was gone, asking Brumm to see that his things were sent after him.

Swinging away from the door in his independence, he commenced his walk to the station at Lexington, with a step firm and fleet, as became an angry man. For a very short way his road lay through the covered private walk, and here, as he was going along full pelt, he encountered Mrs. Beauclerc, her niece and daughter.

"Were you coming to escort us?" asked Georgina, her tongue ready as usual.

"I am hastening to Lexington," he said. "I am going back to London."

"Not to-night?"

"To-night. By the first train that passes."

"Whatever for?"

He made no reply. He turned to Mrs. Beau-

clerc, asking if he could do anything for her in town.

"Nothing, thank you," she answered, "unless you should see the dean. He was to be in London about this time, I believe. If you do see him, tell him that the sooner he joins us the better it may be for Miss Georgina. *I* can do nothing with her; she's putting herself beyond my control. Would you believe that she was out for some hours to-day, never coming in until dark, and she will not tell me what was keeping her or who she was with!"

Frederick St. John hardly heard the complaint. He turned to Sarah, who had walked on, as if impatient at the encounter.

"Will you not say God speed to me? I may not be here again for a long, long while."

She did not put out her hand. She simply wished him good evening. Just this same freezing conduct had she observed to him in the one or two interviews that had taken place since his arrival. Who knows but it was the turning point in their destiny? But for this repellent manner, made unnecessarily pointed, and which had told so disagreeably on him, he might in this contest with his brother have said: not Anne my wife:



change her into another, and I will not say you nay. That it would have been listened to by Isaac St. John, there was little doubt: so anxious were he and Mrs. St. John that Frederick should marry. In that case, the greater portion of this history would not have been written.

He shook hands with Mrs. Beauclerc, and she stepped on after her niece. Georgina was last.

"I never saw mamma in such a passion," whispered the giddy girl. "I had kept dinner waiting, you see, and nothing exasperates her like that. Then she wanted to know where I had been: 'Out with the gipsies,' I answered. I couldn't tell the truth, you know. She was so mad!"

"And where had you been?"

"Where had I been! That's good, from you! In this very grove, here, watching for the carriage of Mr. St. John. I came into it at half-past twelve, and never got out of it until between six and seven!"

"You are a good and true girl, Georgina, though you are a random one," he said, taking her hand and speaking in a softer tone than she

generally heard from him. "How shall I repay you for what you have done for me?"

"Oh, it's not much," she said, her large grey eyes raised to his, discernible in the clear night. He might have thought he saw a moisture in them, but for her light tone, her careless laugh. "It's not much, I say. Tell me why you are going to London?"

"Because I have had a dispute with Isaac. Fare you well, Georgina; take care of yourself, child. Thank you ever for what you have done for me."

The eyes had tears in them now, unmistakeably; and her hand rested in his with a lingering pressure. Mr. St. John stooped in his heedless lightness, and left a kiss upon her lips.

"There's no harm in it that I know of, Georgina. We have ever been as brother and sister."

Her cheeks crimsoned, her pulses beating, her whole frame thrilling with a rapture hitherto unknown, she stood motionless as he disappeared round the turning of the walk. But ere she had realized the emotion to her own soul, it gave place to sober fact, untinged with sentiment. The delusive mist cleared away from her eyes, and

she saw things as they *were*, not as they might have been.

“As brother and sister!” she murmured in her pain. “Only as brother and sister!”

## CHAPTER XVI.

### ST. MARTIN'S EVE ROUND AGAIN.

It was the 10th of November, St. Martin's Eve, the birthday of the young chief of Alnwick, and of his little brother George; the first birthday, as you will remember, since the death of Mr. Carleton St. John, and of the boy's inheritance. Benja was five, George three, that day.

The day was one of ovation to Benja. With early morning a serenade of music had been heard underneath the windows, proceeding from some of the tenantry; the servants came in with their respectful congratulations; and sundry visitors drove up after breakfast to pay the same. A present had arrived for Benja in the morning from General Carleton—a handsome gold watch, which must have cost twenty or thirty guineas. The General had never married, and knew far less about children than he did about Hottentots,

so no doubt thought a gold watch was a suitable present for a young gentleman of five. Benja was highly pleased with the costly toy, and of course wished to appropriate it forthwith to use, so Honour attached some black watered-ribbon to it, which she put round his neck, and let him display the watch from his belt, the key hanging. It was a key and seal in one; Master Benja's crest and initials were engraved on it, and it was attached to the watch by a short gold chain.

Matters were not progressing favourably between Prance and Honour. And if you think, my readers, that the squabbles of two maid-servants are, or ought to be, of too contemptuous insignificance to be thus frequently alluded to, I can only say that the fact bears so much upon the tragic event soon to be related, there was no help for entering upon it. About a fortnight previous to this, Honour had had a day's holiday to go and see some relatives; she had wished to take Benja with her, which Mrs. St. John would not allow, and he was left under the charge of Prance. In the course of the afternoon, Mrs. St. John drove over to Alnwick Cottage, taking George: they remained there to dinner, and during this absence of hers Prance and Benja came to an issue.

When Honour returned to the Hall—and she reached it before Mrs. St. John did—she found that Benja had not only been whipped with more severity than was seemly, but that he had been locked up alone in an isolated room, where his cries could not be heard. She found him exhausted with weeping, marks raised on his back—together in a sad state. Whether, as Prance affirmed, Master Benja had been unbearably insolent to her; whether, as Honour said and believed, she must maliciously have taken the offered opportunity to pay off old scores of dislike to him, was not satisfactorily settled. Probably the real fact might lie between the two. But you may judge what sort of an explosion came from Honour. Prance shut herself in her chamber, and would vouchsafe no answer to it; the servants took part with Honour, for Prance had never yet found favour with them. Mrs. St. John returned home in the midst of the commotion. Honour carried Benja and the complaint to her; but she seemed to treat it with indifference, and did not reprove Prance, so far as the household could learn. Honour had been in a state of indignation from that day to this, and her animosity to Prance was bitter. “She’d kill

the boy if she could," was the remark of hers that went openly through the house.

Mrs. St. John sat in her drawing-room, waiting for the boys. She had promised to dine with them that day at two, and cut the birthday pudding, foregoing her usual late dinner. Being a rather strict disciplinarian as to the children's taking their meals regularly, she preferred to change her own hour for once, not theirs. The boys were being attired, and she sat waiting for them, her outward demeanour calm as usual, her inward mind a very chaos of rebellious tumult.

The marks of honour shown to Benja that day had not been extended to George. They were paid to the boy as *the heir*, not simply as Benja St. John. People had kissed Georgy, and wished him many happy returns, but there it ended. There had been no court paid to him, no music, no set congratulations; *they* had been rendered to the chief of Alnwick. And Mrs. St. John was resenting this; ah, how bitterly. It was the first time the wide contrast between the position of the boys had been brought palpably before her, and but for the very greatest control she had burst into a frenzy.

"I can't bear it; I can't bear it," she exclaimed

to herself, clasping her hands in pain. "Why should my boy be displaced for that other—despised—passed over as nothing! My darling! my life! my all! If he had but been born first; if he had but been born first!"

She unclasped her hands, and bent her head down on them, striving hard to subdue her emotions; striving, indeed, to put away the unhealthy train of thought. None knew better than herself how utterly futile it was to indulge it, how much happier it would be for her if she could drive it away to some far-off Lethe, whence it would never rise again. There's not the least doubt that this poor young woman, who had been born into the world with passions unwholesome, and had not had them checked in childhood, was really trying to do a good part by her step-son; and she believed she was doing it. She relied entirely on her own strength: she had not learnt yet where to look for any other. The daily struggle was getting rather formidable. It was directed to two points: on the one hand, she strove to hide partially her own most passionate love for her child; on the other, she tried to overcome her jealous dislike of Benja. But there were times, as to-day, when this jealousy raged



within her, hot and fierce as lava, seeming to scorch her breast to madness.

The children came in, radiant in good humour and happiness; Benja with his face of intelligence, Georgy with his shower of fair curls and pretty ways. Mrs. St. John lifted her pale face and kissed them both: she *was* striving, in her own feeble way, against her evil spirit. They wore new black velvet birthday dresses, with narrow crimped cambric frills round the neck, and on the left sleeve of each dress was a knot of crape, the badge of their mourning. From Benja's belt was displayed conspicuously the new watch; and Benja did not tire of rattling the chain. Even that little trifle, the present of the watch, was made a subject of resentment by Mrs. St. John. Benja had two watches now. In the last days of his father's illness he had taken his watch off and given it to Benja. "When he shall be twelve years old, Charlotte, let him take it into use," he said to his wife. Yes; Benja had two fine watches; Georgy none.

Georgy began, in his noisy fashion, to climb on his mother's knee, and Mrs. St. John threw back the white crape lappets of her cap as she clasped the boy to her. Georgy, however, did not

favour clasping as a rule, and he struggled out of it.

"What's that?" cried he, snatching at a note that lay on the table at his mother's elbow.

"That's a note from grandmamma, Georgy; she cannot come to us to-day."

"Oh, I am so sorry," cried Benja, who was exceedingly fond of Mrs. Darling, always kind and good-humoured to the children. "Why can't she come, mamma?"

"She's not well," answered Mrs. St. John, languidly, but in a tone that seemed to indicate she did not care much about the matter, one way or the other. Mrs. Darling had been invited to spend the birthday with them; but in the note just received from her by Mrs. St. John, she intimated that she was very unwell indeed. A rare excuse for Mrs. Darling to put forward, who was always in the possession of rude health.

"Mamma, me want a watch."

"You shall have one, my son."

"When?" continued Georgy.

"As soon as I can get out to buy you one."

"One that goes, like Benja's?" demanded Master Georgy.

"It shall be the best gold watch that I can

buy for money," answered Mrs. St. John, allowing the passionate emotion that the subject called up to become momentarily apparent.

An opportune interruption intervened: the butler came in and announced dinner. Mrs. St. John, feeling a relief, she could not tell from what, went quickly to the dining-room, Georgy held in her hand, Benja following.

It was a sumptuous repast. The housekeeper had put forth her strength to do honour to the birthdays; but, had you asked her *why* she had so exerted herself, she might have said it was the heir she had thought of, more than the little one. Inviting as the entertainment was, however, there was one of the three who did little justice to it, and that was Mrs. St. John. She could not eat: but, as if the fire of her restless spirit had imparted itself to her body, she drank frequently, as one parched with thirst. Sherry and champagne were the wines used with dinner. She was kind and attentive to the boys, helping both to whatever dishes they chose, and to as much as they chose. Prance, who was in attendance upon Master George, seeing that his fine birthday dress did not come to grease and stains, forgot her good manners by telling him that he "ate

enough for a little pig:” of which Mrs. St. John took no manner of notice, but continued to heap his plate according to his fancy. Honour was not present, Master Benja being considered old enough now to be waited on by the men servants.

The dinner came to an end, the servants and Prance withdrew, and the children were left to the dessert with their mamma. Mrs. St. John was drinking port wine then and cracking walnuts, of which latter fruit she was very fond. By and by, when the boys were like Captain Johnson's wife——. But you may be looking off in wonder as to what that similarity may mean. I'll tell you; at the risk of the anecdote's being called vulgar: but, mind you, it is a true one.

A worthy merchant-commander, Captain Johnson, who had risen from nothing (as many of these sea-captains do rise), was invited, with his wife, after a more than usually successful voyage, to dine at the luxurious table of his ship's owner. His consort, as well as himself, responded to the invitation; a fine woman, splendidly arrayed. A goodly company, gentlemen and gentlewomen, had assembled to meet them and do honour to the prosperous captain; and Mrs. Johnson had the chief post assigned her, at the right hand of

her host. When dinner was nearly over, the host invited the lady to partake of some particular dish. "No, I thank you, sir," said she, "I'd rather not." The host pressed it, speaking in favour of its merits. "No, I thank you, sir," repeated Mrs. Johnson, "I'm chock full; fit to bust."

Well, when the two boys, Georgy especially, were like Captain Johnson's wife, they grew tired of sitting, slid off their chairs, and began to look out for some amusement. Had Mrs. St. John been wise, she would have rung the nursery-bell then, and sent them to it, where they might play at leisure; but she was absorbed with her walnuts and port wine, and did nothing of the sort. After capering about for a short while, George went up to Benja.

"Let me have the watch on now," he began.

"No," said Benja, "you'll break it."

"Me shan't break it," lisped Georgy.

"I'm afraid," returned Benja, rather indecisively. "Honour said you would."

"Mamma, Benja won't let me have his watch!"

"Don't ask him, my darling," said Mrs. St. John, her mother's heart more resentful at the refusal than Georgy's was, for the conversation

had penetrated to her senses. "I will buy you a better one than that."

"But me want that now," retorted resolutely Master George, who had a will of his own. "Me won't break it, Benja."

Benja possessed one of the kindest hearts breathing. He looked at his watch, thinking he should not like it to be broken, and then he looked at Georgy, who stood turning up his pretty face, eagerly protesting he would take care of it. In another moment, Benja had hung the watch round the younger one's neck.

Enough gratification for the time. Georgy paraded up and down the room, the watch hanging before him on his velvet tunic, as if the walls were alive with eyes, and he was challenging their admiration. Presently he stood still, took off the watch, and began to open it.

"Don't do that," interposed Benja, who had been watching all the time. "You'll spoil it. Give it back to me."

"No," said Master George, very positively.

"Give it back to me, I tell you, Georgy."

"Give him back his watch, Georgy, my dearest," interrupted Mrs. St. John. "Let him keep it to himself if he is so selfish."

Benja, child though he was, felt a sense of injustice. But the reproach told, and he made no further remonstrance: there was ever a certain timidity in his heart when in the presence of Mrs. St. John. So George thought he could go as far as he pleased with impunity, and his next movement was to take firm hold of the short gold chain and swing the watch round and round after the manner of a rattle.

"Oh, mamma, mamma!" cried Benja in an agony, running up to Mrs. St. John and laying his hands on her knee, the better to attract her attention, "do not let him spoil my watch. See what he is doing with it!"

Mrs. St. John's usual self-control deserted her. That self-control, I mean, which enabled her to treat Benja and George with equal justice. Whether the morning's doings, the ovations to Benja, were really exciting her more than she could bear, or whether—but let that pass for the present. However it might be, she tacitly refused to interfere, and pushed Benja from her with a gesture of dislike. The boy, finding he could get no redress where it ought to have been afforded, ran back to Georgy, and seized hold of him, just as he was flying to his mother for protection.

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The naughty, spoiled child, finding he might not long retain possession of the watch, dashed it into a far corner, and they heard its glass crash on the floor, beyond the turkey carpet.

Benja was by nature a sweet-tempered child: he had also been kept under by Mrs. St. John; but this was more than he could bear. He burst into a loud fit of weeping, and struck out at Georgy with all his might and main. Georgy roared, screamed, kicked, and tried to bite.

As a tigress flies to protect its young, up rose Mrs. St. John, her voice shrieking, her eyes wearing that strangely wild look at times observable there. A passion, mad and fierce as that you once saw her in, in the presence of her husband, overpowered her now. As she had hurled Benja to the ground that ever-to-be-remembered day, so she would have hurled him this: but the boy was older and stronger now, and he struggled against it. Better that he had yielded! it might in a degree have appeased the mad woman who was upon him: and his strength was as nothing compared to hers. His little head was struck against the table, his costly new birthday dress was torn right across. He screamed with pain, Georgy screamed with



terror, and Honour, who happened to be near the door at the time, came rushing in.

"Good Heavens!" she exclaimed, "what is it? What has he done?"

"Me took his watch," sobbed little Georgy, in a fit of remorseful generosity. "Me not want mamma to hit him like that."

"How can you for shame treat him in such a manner, ma'am?" cried out Honour indignantly, as her own passion rose, and she spoke to her mistress as she had never dared to speak before. "Poor orphan child! Nobody to protect him! How can you reconcile it to the memory of my dead master?"

Mrs. Carleton St. John stood glaring at the girl, her hand pointed imperiously, her voice low now with command. It was as if some soothing oil had been thrown on the festering wounds of passion.

"To-morrow morning you quit my service, Honour Tritton? I never tolerate insolence, and I find that you have been here too long. Take that boy out of my sight."

Somehow they had all hemmed themselves, in the fray, into a corner, and the broken glass was cracking under Mrs. St. John's feet. Honour

picked up the watch with a jerk, which bespoke the temper she was in, clasped the sobbing boy tenderly in her arms, and went up-stairs with him, meeting Prance at the dining-room door, who was gliding in.

"It's a burning shame!" broke forth Honour, sitting down by the nursery fire and dashing the coals about with the poker, as if she would have dashed them out of the grate, while she held Benja to her with the other hand—"it's a burning shame that he should be so treated! If she does turn me away, I'll go every step of the way to Castle Wafer and tell all I know to your guardian, Benja. If I don't do it, may Heaven never prosper me!"

Poor little ill-treated child! He lay there in her lap, smarting with the pain, his trembling heart beating.

"Let the worst come to the worst, my precious lamb, it can only be for a few years," began Honour again. "I know it said in my master's will that you were to be sent early to Eton."

"What's Eton?" sobbed Benja.

"Something very good," rejoined Honour, who had no defined ideas on the subject herself. "And when you are of age, my darling, all Aln-

wick will be yours, and she and Master Georgy must turn out of it."

"Where will they go?" asked Benja.

"I don't know where, and it don't matter where," continued the woman in her injudicious partizanship. "You will be master at Alnwick, and nobody can live here then unless you choose to let them."

"Who is master now?" questioned Benja.

"You are, my pretty boy, and have been ever since your papa died; only she lives in it and gives orders because you are not old enough. Master's wits must have gone a wool-gathering," added the exasperated Honour in soliloquy, "when he left her with any power over the child at all."

Honour was right in the main.

Benja remained on her lap, his sobs gradually subsiding. He lay thinking of many things, such as occur to children, his ideas running from one topic to another. Presently he spoke.

"Honour, when is my church to be finished?"

"Suppose I finish it this afternoon," cried Honour, starting up. "There's scarcely anything left of it to do, and if I am turned away it may never get done."

Opening a closet door, she took from it what seemed to be the model of a very pretty country church, with its spire. You need not ask whence she took the idea, if you remember the visit to the "Emporium of Foreign Curiosities," and the promise to Benja. Like many another thing entered upon in hurry and haste, this coveted treasure had not been completed yet. The fact was, Honour found more trouble over it than she had anticipated, and Benja, in the protracted waiting, forgot his eagerness. All that was left to do now was the pasting on of the coloured windows. They were cut out of thin rose-tinted paper; the walls of the structure being of thicker paper, white, and the framework of thin wood, all open at the top.

Honour collected her materials, and soon accomplished her task, though she had not been sparing of her windows. Benja forgot his troubles in watching her. She had taken off his velvet dress, with many a lamentation over the rent, and put on him a tunic of brown-holland, handsomely trimmed with black silk braid. Over that she tied a white pinafore, lest he should make too free acquaintance with the paste.

At dusk all was completed, and this famous

church lighted up by means of the bit of candle inside. Benja clapped his hands with delight. It was a novel, ingenious, picturesque sight, more especially to a child. The fire had burned low and there was no other light in the room, so that the church was shown off to perfection, and was a really striking and conspicuous object. Suddenly the flame inside began to whiffle.

"It's the draught from that door," observed Honour. "Shut it, Benja ; shut it gently."

She spoke of the door which opened into Mrs. St. John's dressing-room. It is possible that you may remember there was formerly no door there ; but Mrs. St. John had caused one to be made on the birth of George, that she might pass into the nursery at will, without going into the corridor. Now that George was beyond babyhood, this door was generally kept bolted, the bolt being on Mrs. St. John's side, not any on that of the nursery ; but it was sometimes, as now, left open.

Honour turned her head to the door as she spoke, and saw the little boy place his two hands flat upon the panel to push it to, after the manner of children, and it gently shut. Benja came to

the table again to feast his eyes. The whiffing of the flame was remedied now.

"There ought to be moss all round here," observed Honour, pointing to the projecting board on which the church rested. "But it's too late to put it on to-night: and, for the matter of that, I have no moss. If I stop, we will ask the gardener to get some."

Benja did not care for the moss. To his admiring eyes nothing could improve its present aspect. He gazed at it on the high drawers, he danced before it on the table, he carried it to and fro in the room, obeying Honour's injunctions to keep it upright and steady. In this manner some time passed, and they allowed the fire to go out.

"Bother take the fire!" ejaculated Honour. "And I have got neither wood nor matches up here."

She had her hand upon the bell, when it suddenly occurred to her that she would go down for the things herself. Nobody living liked a gossip better than she, and the scene in the dining-parlour was burning a hole in her tongue. Placing the church on the table, and charging Benja strictly not to touch it while she was away,

Honour went out by the ordinary door of egress, and descended the back stairs. To *this* door, and I would have you note the difference, the fastening was inside. It was not a bolt, but a common button, placed high up beyond reach of the children.

Never had Honour relished a gossip more than the one she now entered on with the servants. Every little detail of the dining-room affray, so far as she had been a witness to it, was related by her to the ready-hearted servants, who did not spare their comments or their sympathy. Honour was quite unable to tear herself away, until by the striking of the clock she found she must have been there nearly half-an-hour. Hardly believing her ears, she caught up a bundle of faggots and a box of matches, popped them into her apron, together with a pair of snuffers and an extinguisher, and ran up the stairs. Turning the handle of the door to enter hastily, she was surprised to find that she could not open it.

"Master Benja, why have you fastened the door?" she called out. "Come and undo it."

There was no reply.

"He must have got upon a chair and turned the button," soliloquised Honour. But at that

moment she became conscious of a smell of burning, as of wool. Letting the things she carried fall down with a crash, she flew along the passage and turned into her mistress's dressing-room, that she might obtain entrance that way. That door was also fastened, but on the outer side. It was no unusual occurrence, in fact it was mostly kept bolted, as was just now observed, and Honour at the moment thought nothing of it. Slipping back the bolt, she went in.

Oh! what did Honour see! Where was the young heir of Alnwick? A dark mass smouldering on the floor at the far end of the room, the carpet smouldering, no trace whatever remaining of the pretty and dangerous toy she had made, no trace of *him*, save that shapeless heap from which the spirit had flown!

With awful cries, with wild groans of terrified alarm, that sounded as much like the barking of a dog as the voice of a human being, Honour flew shrieking through the dressing-room, and down the grand staircase, her strange cries arousing the household, arousing Mrs. St. John.



## CHAPTER XVII.

### CONFLICTING STATEMENTS.

How the night went on subsequently, few at the Hall could tell. For some time it was one inextricable scene of horror and confusion. One of the grooms, unbidden, saddled a horse and went galloping for Mr. Pym; and in an almost incredibly short space of time, the surgeon was there. But what could he do? That one precious little spirit had gone, never to be recalled by leech of this world. Another, however, wanted the attentions of Mr. Pym,—and that was little George. The child, aroused by the cries of Honour from a sleep he had fallen into in the dining-room, had escaped up-stairs into the nursery. A panic of terror overtook him, baby though he was, at what he saw there, and at being told it was Benja, and he fell into a succession of fits of sickness and shivering.

It must be assumed—it was so assumed in the house—that this burning was the result of accident; the result, it may also be said, of Honour Tritton's carelessness. She had gone down-stairs secure in the belief that the boy would obey her mandate and not touch the church. Oh, how could she have been so foolish! To look at a new toy and not touch it, to gaze at its attractions from a respectful distance and not finger it, is philosophy beyond a child. Perhaps the little boy—for he was an obedient boy naturally—tried for some minutes to exercise his patience; but no doubt could be entertained that he at length took the church in his hands again. In how short a time the accident occurred, and how it occurred, was as yet hidden—it may be said, hidden in mystery.

The position of those in the house during this time appeared to be as follows. The servants were all below stairs, with the exception of Prance; and Honour, as you have heard, was with them. Mrs. St. John and George were shut up in the dining-room, the latter asleep, the former, as she said, nearly if not quite asleep also. Where Prance was at the time did not as yet appear, neither had any question been raised in regard to it

But in the midst of the dreadful horror fighting in the brain of the unhappy Honour, two points thrust themselves prominently forward. The one was, How did the child get fastened in the room? the other was, that she had seen Prance hiding in a recess of the passage as she ran along it. This was not so much a *remembrance* as a *conviction*; and it seemed to Honour as if she had not noticed, or very superficially noticed, Prance's being there at the time, but the fact had flashed into her mind afterwards. On the opposite side of the passage, about midway between the nursery-door and the dressing-room door, the recess was situated—a small arched recess. Poor Mr. Carleton St. John in his life-time had used to wonder laughingly whether the architect had put it there for ornament or for use.

The first person Mr. Pym sought on his arrival, after he had taken a hopeless look at that sight in the nursery, whose floor was now half-drowned in the water used to put the fire out, was Mrs. St. John. She was in the dining-room, and he found her almost unnaturally calm and collected; some people are so in these moments of calamity. The only sign of emotion was her death-like pallor. She gave him the account of

what had occurred, so far, she observed, as she knew it; candidly confessing to the fracas that had taken place in the room after dinner. Benja had set upon George unmercifully, and in return she had corrected Benja: boxed his ears, and, she really believed, had shaken him. It was very rare indeed that she was so hasty with either of the children; and she would give the whole world not to have touched him, now that he was gone. After Honour took him away to the nursery, she had remained in the dining-room, not quitting it until disturbed by the shrieks of Honour. Prance came in once or twice to know if she should take George, but she did not let him go. The boy went to sleep in his papa's large chair, and she sat down by him and took his legs upon her lap. She was nearly asleep herself when the cries began, and she had felt startled nearly to death. The whole fault, she feared, lay with Honour. The woman had confessed the facts in the first moment of terror: that she had left Benja alone with some dangerous paper toy lighted up with a candle, while she went downstairs and stayed gossiping with the servants. The poor little fellow must have set himself on fire.

"But did nobody hear his cries?" asked Mr. Pym, who had not previously interrupted the narrative.

Mrs. St. John supposed not. All she knew was, that they had not penetrated to the dining-room. The surgeon listened. He knew the walls on that side the house were very thick, and if the child was shut in the nursery—as it appeared he had been—it was hardly likely that he would be heard, unless any one had happened to be up-stairs. The dining-room was in the other wing of the house, its doors double ones; and the kitchens were beyond the dining-room.

"The odd thing to me is, that he did not run out of the room," cried Mr. Pym. "A strong lad of five years old would hardly stop in a room to be burnt, for the want of escaping out of it. The first thing most of us attempt in a like calamity is to run from the room: often a fatal step. But he does not seem to have attempted it."

Mrs. St. John shook her head. She did not know any of the details: they must of course be left to supposition. Honour deserved hanging for having left the child alone with a lighted toy.

It was at this juncture that Mr. Pym's attention was called to George. The child was very sick; had been sick at intervals since the fright. After attending to him, Mr. Pym went in search of Honour. He found her alone, in a lamentable state of distress, in the bed-room that had been hers and the unhappy child's.

And now it must be mentioned that Honour had been arriving at a sudden and very dreadful doubt. As the mists cleared away from her brain and she was able to reflect more calmly upon the probabilities of the accident, she began to think whether it had not been wilfully caused. And the doubt was assuming the aspect of certainty in her mind, when Mr. Pym came in.

For some minutes she could not speak; she could only cry and sob, and cover her face with her apron in very shame and remorse. Mr. Pym did not reproach her in her distress: he rather set himself, when she had gathered calmness, to learn what he could of the particulars. Honour freely confessed all. She told of the affair in the dining-room, giving a different colouring to it from that her mistress had done, and causing Mr. Pym's grey eyebrows to scowl themselves into ugliness. She told how she had finished the

church for him, describing what it was, and where the idea had been taken from. She said she had left it with him lighted, had gone down for wood, and stayed talking the best part of half-an-hour. Not a thing did she conceal; not a point that could tell against herself did she gloss over.

"He was always an obedient boy," she wailed, "and I did not think he would touch it when I bade him not. And I never thought I had been down so long, till I heard the clock strike!"

"It is strange you did not hear his cries!"

"The kitchens are too far off."

"And it is very strange that the boy did not run out of the room: unless smoke overpowered him at first. I cannot make out why he did not. It is a bad plan in general, but in this instance it might have saved his life by bringing help to him."

Honour made no immediate remark. She had been sitting in a low chair, swaying her body backwards and forwards in her distress. Suddenly she looked up at the surgeon and spoke in a low tone.

"I want to know who fastened the doors."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Pym, after a pause of surprise.

"I don't think he was burnt by accident, sir,"

she continued, glancing at the walls as if afraid of being overheard, and speaking in the faintest possible whisper. "I think it was done on purpose."

"Good Heavens, woman!" exclaimed the astonished surgeon, really wondering whether the trouble was turning her brain.

"There are things connected with it that I can't understand," she continued. "They did not strike me particularly at the moment, but they do now that I can think of them. He *couldn't* get out of the room; he was fastened in."

That she was not suffering under mental aberration at present, was apparent enough to the surgeon; the girl was as sane as he was. Honour thought he was never going to leave off staring at her.

"When I left him up-stairs, I left both doors open; that is, unfastened," she went on. "When I got back again, both were fastened; the one on the inside, the other on the out. *I want to know who did it.*"

It might have been a fancy of Honour's, but she thought the doctor changed countenance.

"Are you sure of this?" he asked.

"As sure as I am that I am living and my darling child is dead."



Mr. Pym's eyebrows contracted themselves into five hundred angles. "Just describe to me consecutively what occurred, will you?" he said. "How did you know that the doors were fastened?"

"Because I couldn't get in," said Honour, thinking it rather a simple question. "When I got back with my little bundle of faggots, I found the door was buttoned inside. I thought the child had got upon the chair and done it; but, short as the moment was that I had for thought, it struck me as being strange, for I had never known him to do such a thing before. As I was calling to him to unfasten it, I fancied there was a smell of burning, and I ran round through my mistress's dressing-room and turned the handle of the door to push it open, and found that door was also fastened, bolted from the outside. The smell was very strong then, and in my frenzy I forgot the strangeness of the circumstance, for the door is in general kept bolted——"

"Then why should you be surprised at finding it bolted then?" interrupted Mr. Pym.

"Because it was not bolted when I went down," returned Honour. "It was open while I was finishing the church, and I told the child to shut

it, as the draught caused the flame inside the paper walls to whiffle. He pushed the door too with his dear little hands, and I watched him. That's how I know it was unfastened then, sir."

"In your flurry afterwards, when you attempted to enter, you perhaps only fancied it was fastened," suggested Mr. Pym.

"No, sir. When I tried to open it and could not, I felt at the bolt and found it was pushed into the groove to its full extent. The end of it came beyond the groove, and I pushed it back with my two fingers."

Mr. Pym rose impulsively, as if he would look at the door for himself; but halted suddenly and sat down again.

"That could not have been done without hands," proceeded Honour. "And why was it done?"

The surgeon made no attempt to answer the question. He seemed very greatly put out, as if the revelation had alarmed or unnerved him, scarcely noticing Honour.

"Mrs. St. John says she heard nothing," he presently observed to himself, as one in abstraction. "Honour," he continued in a straightforward tone to the girl, "I think you must be mis-

taken. There appears to have been no one up-stairs who would have bolted it. Mrs. St. John tells me she did not quit the dining-room : the servants say they never came up at all during the afternoon."

"One of them was up," rejoined Honour in the same low voice, and the same roving of her eyes around the walls, "and that was Prance. I saw her myself; I can't be mistaken. Does *she* say she was not up-stairs, sir?"

"She has said nothing to me one way or the other," replied Mr. Pym. "I heard it said generally that the servants had not been up-stairs."

"Prance was; and if she says she was not, she tells a lie. She was hid in the recess outside, opposite the doors."

"Hid in the recess. When?"

"After I dropped the things from my apron, and was running round to the dressing-room, I saw Prance standing inside the recess; she was squeezing herself against the wall, sir, as if afraid I should see her."

"Did you speak to her?"

"No, sir; and you may feel surprised at what I am going to say, but it's the truth. I was so

flurried at the time, what with finding the first door fastened and with the smell of burning, that I did not seem then to be conscious I did see her. I suppose my eyes took in the momentary impression without conveying it to my senses. But afterwards it all came into my mind at once, and I remembered it, and how she was standing. It was just as if she had fastened the doors, and then put herself there to listen to the child's dying cries."

"Hush!" authoritatively reproved Mr. Pym. "You are not yourself, girl, or you would not say it."

"I don't think I am," candidly acknowledged Honour, bursting into tears. "My brain feels as if it were on the turn of madness. Prance has been cross and hard and cruel to the child always, and I'm naturally excited against her."

"But she'd not shut the doors upon him if he were burning," retorted the surgeon, some anger in his tone. "You should be careful what you say."

"I wish I could be put out of my misery!" sobbed Honour. "I wish they'd hang me for my carelessness in leaving him alone with a lighted toy! I did do that; and I hope I shall be

punished for it; I shall never know another happy moment. Thus far the fault is mine. But I did not fasten the doors upon him, so that he could not escape for his life: and I am perfectly certain that in any fright, or calamity, or danger, the first impulse of the child would have been to fly down the back-stairs to me."

She threw her apron over her head, sobbing and crying, and swaying her body backwards and forwards on the chair as before, in the intensity of her emotion. The surgeon sat still a few moments, endeavouring to recall his scattered senses, and then rose and touched her shoulder to command attention. She let fall her apron.

"This thing that you affirm must be investigated, look you, Honour. For—for—for the sake of all, it must be sifted to the bottom. Nobody in their right minds," he emphatically added, "would shut the doors upon a burning child; and that appears to be the theory you have adopted, so far as I can gather it. Have you stated these facts to your mistress?"

"I have not seen her since," answered Honour. "Except at the first moment, when I ran down in my terror."

"And she came out of the dining-room then?"

"She did, sir. The little child—he is the heir now—ran out after her."

"Honour," said the surgeon, gravely and earnestly, "I do not fancy your bent of thought just now is a wholesome one. You had better put it from you. I want you to come with me and tell your mistress about the doors being fastened."

He went out of the room, Honour following. In the passage outside, suspiciously near to the door, was Prance. The woman made a feint of being in a hurry, and was whisking down the back-stairs.

"Here, Prance, I want you," said the surgeon. "I was about to ask you to come to me."

The woman turned at once, quite readily, as it appeared, and entirely unruffled. She stood calm, cool, quiet, before Mr. Pym, in her neat black gown, her silk apron, with the black ribbon strings of her close cap tied underneath her chin. Not a shade of change was observable on her impassive face, not the faintest hue of emotion lighted her pale, sharp features.

"This is a very dreadful thing, Prance," he began.

"It is indeed, sir," she answered in her measured tones, which, if they had not any demon-

strative feeling in them, had certainly no irreverence.

"How did the doors get fastened on the unfortunate boy?"

Prance paused for about the hundredth part of a minute. "I was not aware they were fastened, sir." And the answer appeared to be really genuine.

"Honour says they were. Upon returning from the kitchen, and attempting to enter by this door"—pointing to the one still closed on the miserable scene—"she found she could not enter. The inside button had been turned during her absence below. Did you go into the nursery yourself and fasten it? No one else, I believe, is in the habit of frequenting the nursery but you and Honour."

"I did not go, sir. I did not not go into the nursery at all during the afternoon. Master George was down-stairs with his mamma, and I had nothing to take me into it. If the button was turned in the manner described, I should think Master Benja must have got upon a chair and done it himself."

Still the same impassive face; and still, it must be acknowledged, the same air of genuine truth.

"That may be," remarked Mr. Pym. "The same thought had occurred to me. But there's another point not so easy to get over. Honour says that the other door was also fastened, the one leading into the dressing-room—was bolted on the outside."

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," replied Prance; and this time there was a shade of uncertainty, of hesitation, in her voice; not, however, very perceptible to ordinary ears. "That door generally is kept bolted," she added more freely, raising her eyes to the doctor's. "My mistress took to keep it so, because Master George was always running in while she was dressing."

"But——"

"Be quiet, Honour," said Mr. Pym, cutting the interruption short. "You are in the habit of attending on your mistress, I believe, Prance, and therefore are sometimes in her dressing-room," he continued. "Do you remember whether that door was open to-day?"

"No, sir, I don't," said Prance, after a minute's consideration. "I dressed my mistress this morning for the early dinner, and put the room straight afterwards, but I do not remember whether the door was open or shut. I should think it was shut."



"It was wide open this afternoon," burst forth Honour, unable to keep her tongue still any longer, and believing Prance could remember if she chose. "The poor dear child shut it with his own hands while I was finishing his church."

"It is possible," responded Prance, her perfect coolness of demeanour, her propriety of tone, presenting a contrast to the excitement of the miserable Honour. "I cannot remember how it was when I was dressing my mistress, and I had nothing to do in the room after that."

"And did not go into it?" pursued the surgeon.

"And did not go into it," repeated Prance.

"Then you know nothing at all as to how the doors could have got fastened?" proceeded Mr. Pym.

"No, sir, I do not. I could take an oath, if need arose, that I did not know the doors were bolted until you spoke to me now," added the woman, the least possible sound of emotion, arising as it seemed from earnestness, at length perceptible in her tone. "I assure you, sir, I had no idea of it until this moment: I—I should scarcely think it could have been so."

There was an ominous glare in Honour's eye at

the expressed disbelief. Mr. Pym did not want a passage-at-arms between the two then, and raised his hand to command silence.

"Did you hear the child's cries, Prance?" he asked. "It is incredible to suppose that he made no cries; and yet nobody seems to have heard them."

"You mean when he was on fire, sir?"

"Of course I mean when he was on fire."

"I never heard them, sir. A child could not burn to death without making cries, and desperate cries, but I did not hear them," she continued, more in soliloquy to herself than in observation to the surgeon.

"It is an unfortunate thing that no one was within earshot."

Honour looked keenly at her from her swollen eyes. Mr. Pym spoke carelessly.

"By the way, you were in the recess, Prance, just about the time. Did you neither see nor hear anything then?"

"In the recess, sir?"

"In the recess: there," pointing to it.

Prance had turned her impassive face full on Mr. Pym in the utmost apparent astonishment. But not her eyes.

"I was in no recess, sir."

"Yes you were. In that recess; there. Honour passed you when you were in it."

"It is quite a mistake, sir. What should I do in the recess? If Honour says she saw me there, her sight must have deceived her."

"How do you account for your time at the period of the occurrence?" inquired Mr. Pym. "What part of the house were you in?"

"I suppose I must have been in the dining-room, sir," she answered readily. "I was in there until just before the alarm was given, and then I had come up to my bedroom."

"Let's see. That's the room on the other side Mrs. St. John's sleeping-chamber?"

"Yes, sir; formerly my master's dressing-room. After his death, Mrs. St. John placed me and Master George in it. She felt lonely with no one sleeping near her."

"And that's where you were when you heard the alarm?"

"I was in there with the door shut when I heard Honour come screaming along the passage, running towards the grand staircase. I had not been in my room above a couple of minutes at the most. I had come straight up from the dining-room."

CONFLICTING STATEMENTS.

"And you did not go into the recess?"

"Certainly not, sir. What object could I have in doing so? I'd rather keep my petticoats out of the place."

Mr. Pym looked at Honour. His expression said plainly that he thought she must have been mistaken in her fancy.

"What had you done with yourself all the afternoon?" he demanded of Prance.

"I was about," she answered, "in one place or another. Part of the time I was in the onion room——"

"In the onion room!" interrupted Mr. Pym, thinking the appellation an odd one.

"It is called the onion room, sir; onions and herbs, and such like things, are kept in it. I went there for a handful of a particular herb I wanted, and stayed to pick the leaves from the stalks. And I was twice in the dining parlour with my mistress, and stayed there pretty long each time."

"Talking to her?"

"No, sir, scarcely a word passed. My mistress rarely does talk much, to me or to any of us, and she seemed a good deal put out with the scene there was after dinner with Master Benja. Master

George was put out, too, in his little way, and I stayed in the room soothing him. My mistress gave me a glass of wine then, and bade me drink to the children's health. I went in a second time later, and stayed longer than the first, but I was waiting for Master George to awake that I might bring him up to the nursery, for it was getting the children's tea-time."

"But you did not bring him?"

"No, sir, he did not awake, and I got tired of waiting. I came straight upstairs, and went into my room, and I had not been there two minutes when Honour's cries broke out. I had not had time to strike a match and light any candle, and when I ran out of the room to see what was the matter, I had got the match-box in my hand."

This seemed to be as comprehensive an account as Prance could give; and Mr. Pym himself saw no reason to doubt her. Honour did: she had done nothing but doubt the woman ever since she came to the house. Honour believed her to be two-faced, thoroughly sly and artful; "a very cat in deceit." But in a calmer moment even Honour might not have brought herself to think that she would deliberately set fire to an innocent child, or shut the doors on him till he might burn.

Again Mr. Pym went into the presence of Mrs. St. John, the two servants with him. She looked more ghastly than before, and she was sitting with Georgy on her lap, the child sick and trembling still. Mr. Pym mentioned to her what Honour said about the doors being fastened, asking if she could remember whether the one leading from her dressing-room was open in the morning. She answered at once—and she spoke with the calmest and coldest self-possession, which seemed like a very contrast to her ghastly face—that she could not say with any certainty whether the dressing-room door was open that day or not. She remembered quite well that she had unbolted it that same morning while she was getting up, upon hearing the children's voices in the nursery. She had gone in to kiss them and wish them happiness on their birthday. Whether she had rebolted the door afterwards or not, she could not say. She generally rebolted it when she had been in the nursery that way, but it was possible she had not on this morning. "I wish you would not ask these questions," she concluded, momentarily raising her eyes to Mr. Pym, for she had spoken with her face bent down, almost hidden.

"But I must ask them," said the surgeon.

"It frightens George so," she added. "See how he is shivering."

And in truth the child was shivering ; shivering and trembling as one in an ague of alarm. Almost as his mother spoke, he raised himself with a cry, and was violently sick : and all Mr. Pym's attention had to be given to him.

END OF VOL. I.

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### CONTENTS.

- |                                      |                                   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. False Steps.                      | 16. Friendly Infatuation.         |
| 2. The Uses of Dignity.              | 17. Pithiness.                    |
| 3. Quarrels.                         | 18. The Theory of Life from Below |
| 4. Social Salamanders.               | Stairs.                           |
| 5. Vague Aims.                       | 19. Needy Men.                    |
| 6. Falling Off.                      | 20. Philosophers and Politicians. |
| 7. Minor Tribulations.               | 21. Authors and Books.            |
| 8. Thrift.                           | 22. Literary Industry.            |
| 9. Domestic Autocracy.               | 23. Nineteenth Century Sadness.   |
| 10. Culpability and Degradation.     | 24. Weakness of Public Opinion.   |
| 11. Husbands.                        | 25. Pagan Patriotism.             |
| 12. The Companions of our Pleasures. | 26. Occasional Cynicism.          |
| 13. Clever Men's Wives.              | 27. Praise and Blame.             |
| 14. New Ideas.                       | 28. The Artisan and his Friends.  |
| 15. Cynical Fallacies.               | 29. The Terrors of Intellect.     |

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